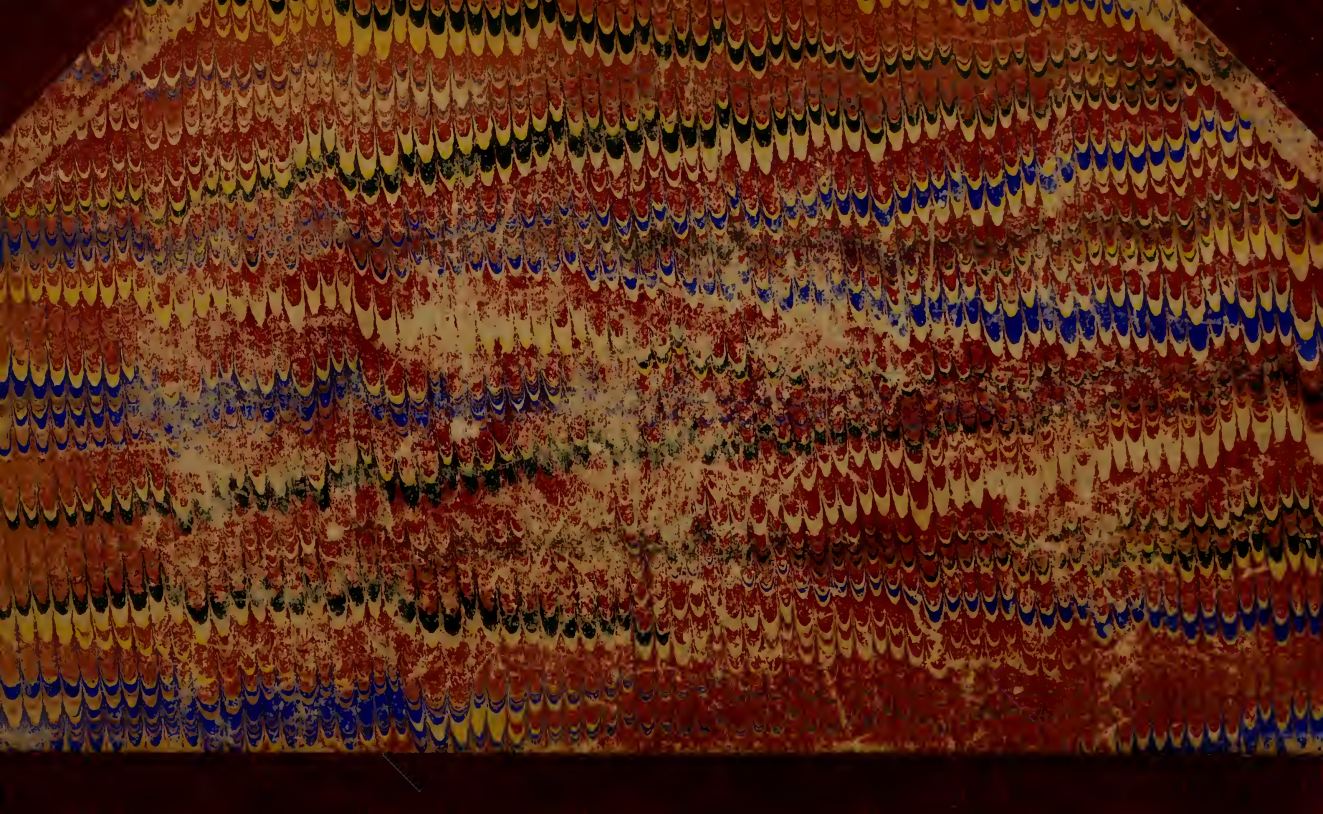

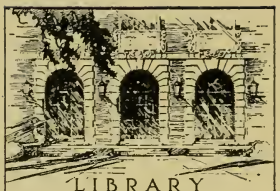

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THE MAN SHE CARED FOR

BY

F. W. ROBINSON

AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY,"
"NO CHURCH,"

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,

13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1884.

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OF

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THE MISTRESS OF ILVERCOMBE.

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BOOK THE THIRD.

THE MISTRESS OF ILVERCOMBE.

(CONTINUED.)

THE MAN SHE CARED FOR.

CHAPTER V.

LOVE OR REMORSE.

MRS. DANGERFIELD the elder was not a woman of any great degree of nerve; there was a manifest weakness about her for which her past malady, or her natural constitution, was accountable. She clasped her thin hands together—they were ungloved and unjewelled—and gave vent to a low, long moan that directed the clergyman's attention to her anew. Mr. Fayre saw that she was very pale, and he said, cautiously, almost sternly,

'You will say nothing to distress her feelings; you will remember that the past can only bring harm to her.'

'I am here to do good, not harm,' she murmured.

'You can do good by your silence,' he replied.

Mrs. Dangerfield may have heard this, but it was doubtful. She was sitting with her hands locked together, and her earnest gaze directed towards the tall young woman coming slowly towards her. This was the child of her dead son—under any circumstances, Paul's child—and she saw her now for the first time in her life. It was like a vision—a revelation from that lost world to which he had departed. He had left word for this girl to be sought after, cared for, redeemed; and six years had gone by, and other hands and hearts had saved her. She had had no share in it.

'Agnes,' said Mr. Fayre, by way of warning as well as introduction, 'this is Mrs. Dangerfield, a neighbour of ours.'

'Who is anxious to make your acquaintance,

Miss Challis, if you will allow me,' the old lady added, with a strange humility.

Agnes Challis looked surprised and even embarrassed for an instant, then she took the lady's extended hands—both of which had been proffered with an eagerness that was remarkable—and pressed them in her own. Both women gazed earnestly at each other, endeavouring, perhaps, to read a story in each other's eyes.

'I am glad to see you,' Agnes Challis said.

'Thank you for saying so,' was the quick answer.

'I have been expecting you—almost,' added Aggie, as she sat down by the old lady's side, and regarded her once more with grave attention.

Mr. Fayre hesitated whether to walk away, or to remain an attentive listener, deciding at last that it would be better to leave the ladies to themselves. When he had turned back towards the house, Mrs. Dangerfield said,

'Why have you been expecting me, child?'

'I heard you were at Ilvercombe,' was the reply. 'I thought the news might reach you

in some way that I was at Mr. Fayre's, and that curiosity might prompt you to see what I was like.'

Aggie spoke plainly and frankly; there was no further embarrassment or hesitation evident; the bright, hazel eyes looked into the dim greys unflinchingly.

'I did not hear of you until yesterday. In London I was told that you were in Birmingham, and I went there in search of you,' said Mrs. Dangerfield.

'Seeing Daniel?' Agnes said, quickly.

'Yes, who informed me you were close at home, after all.'

'He is well?' she asked.

'Quite well,' replied the other; 'he gave me your address. A line from you,' she added, half-reprovingly, 'would have saved me a very long journey; but you did not write.'

'Write!' cried Aggie, and there was a faint ring of scorn in her reply; 'I dared not take the liberty to trouble you with the fact of my existence.'

Old Mrs. Dangerfield reflected upon these

words for a while; then she laid her hand on Aggie's, and said,

'You thought curiosity would lead me to find you out some day, you said a moment since?'

'Yes.'

'Not affection?' she asked, almost nervously.

'No, madam,' replied Aggie, slowly; 'I have not been taught to look for affection from the relatives of my father. You are the first of them to discover me.'

'After some three-and-twenty years,' said Mrs. Dangerfield. 'Yes, it must seem a long neglect to you; but, my poor child, you do not know the world.'

'Oh, yes, I do,' was the ready answer.

'You do not know the whole history of your poor father's life—of your mother's—and of how the world we were speaking of just now judges such a story as this.'

The graceful girl by the old lady's side sat back a little from the speaker, and drew herself up proudly and defiantly.

'Mrs. Dangerfield, it is you who do not know the story,' she cried; 'it is your great, grand

friends who have not guessed it, or, guessing at it, have done me a terrible injustice.'

'I do not understand you,' murmured the old lady.

'It is as well you should not,' replied Aggie, 'for my father was your son, and his memory is a disgrace to me.'

'No, no, don't say that,' entreated the other. 'After all, your father loved you very much; he was coming to save you, he was travelling to help you, when he met his death-blow.'

'Who told you that? Daniel Overdown?'

'I know it for myself.'

'I have tried to believe it,' said Aggie, more thoughtfully, 'but I have never been able to think well of my father. I look back over long years of my childhood, and see only selfishness, neglect, and crime—a mystery beclouding him, and rendering him every day more heartless.'

'But——'

'But he was sorry at the last,' said Aggie, interrupting her. 'You think so, and Daniel Overdown, who never tells a lie, was with him when he died. Well, if such men as my father

are not sorry then,' she added, bitterly, 'God help them.'

Old Mrs. Dangerfield had not been prepared to meet a young lady so outspoken as this—so incomprehensible. It had entered into her imagination to sketch forth an Aggie Challis for herself—a timid, shrinking creature, on whom the past pressed heavily, and to whom the accident of birth was an affliction; who would be glad of her patronage and proud of her notice; who would learn to love her for her charity—and the fancy sketch was not realised in any one degree. She was not quite certain now that she liked Agnes Challis, and she was almost sure she was afraid of her already. This was the child of a weak, wilful woman who yet had had the strength to lure her son from his high estate to hers, and bring about this awful trouble —*her* child as well as her dear lost son's.

'You are very hard,' she said at last; 'I—I did not think you would be like this.'

'I am not always like this,' replied Agnes, half apologetically, as she became aware that the face at which she gazed had fallen into

shadow; 'but I have been brought up in a hard school, and you have reminded me of it very forcibly to-day. For years, Mrs. Dangerfield, I have been trying to forget, to settle down, to be of some little use to the poor and weak and sinful, whom I think I understand as well as most people, having spent time amongst them, and shared experience with them. You know I have been in prison?'

'Why do you speak of that?' said Mrs. Dangerfield, shuddering.

'It is no use disguising a fact which is so easily discoverable; and I thought you knew it.'

'Yes,' confessed the old lady, 'I knew it.'

'Then you must not expect any great degree of refinement from me, although my sense of the disgrace of prison-servitude is not acute. In gaol I was not hardened, and there I met my best friend.'

'Mr. Fayre?'

'Yes, Mr. Fayre. He was a poor man then, but he was a good Christian. When my dear old Daniel wrote to him, and told him something of the truth, he guessed the rest, and

believed in me. Ah! Mrs. Dangerfield, I thank heaven for my prison; I look back upon it gratefully.'

'But your guilt——'

'Madam, I am not guilty,' said Aggie, quietly. 'If that is any consolation to my father's mother, pray accept that assurance, and ask no further questions of me. You have a right to know as much as that, and no more than that,' she added, emphatically.

She rose as if to intimate that the interview was at an end, and the old lady rose with her, more troubled and perplexed than at the beginning of their conference. She did not understand Aggie Challis, and Aggie had not asked for her friendship or protection; even appeared to be distrustful of the motive which had brought her at that early hour to Grayling, as if her father's relatives were folks to be wary of, or she was treasuring up as an offence the silence and neglect of many years.

They went away from the rustic garden-seat, and along the path, towards the front of the house, where the old lady's carriage stopped the

way. Aggie Challis took this course, and Mrs. Dangerfield walked on by her side, as if agreeing to it, and reconciled to being shown the direct way off the premises. Whether she felt weary by long travelling last night and early rising that morning, was hardly manifest; but, before the front gates were reached, she passed her arm through her companion's for support, and the younger woman, thinking that her pace might be too rapid, slackened it instinctively.

'It was not curiosity that brought me here,' the old lady repeated; 'will you believe that?'

'Yes, if you wish it,' answered Aggie.

'I don't think I should like to lose sight of you again,' she continued. 'I can't make you out exactly, but I shall do so, in good time.'

'I am not very incomprehensible,' said Aggie, with a musical little laugh at the old lady's confused manner of explanation; 'but you must not trouble your head about me any more. It is not worth while, and it will distress you as well as me.'

The old lady did not respond readily; she went on in silence again. Presently she said,

'You will come and see me in a few days—or weeks?'

'I hope you will not ask me,' answered Aggie.

Another pause; then Mrs. Dangerfield said,

'Are you happy at the vicarage?'

'Yes; very happy.'

'When you are unhappy, will you tell me?'

'Why?'

'My dear child,' she cried, impulsively. 'I would be glad to help you!'

'In any way?' was the inquiry.

'In any way that would be of benefit to you.'

'It is a big, broad promise,' said Aggie, very thoughtfully; 'I may remind you of it in good time.'

When they were close to the carriage, Mrs. Dangerfield seemed to remember something, and drew her companion into a side-path.

'I have not told you that Miss Dangerfield—my grand-daughter—is a friend of Miss Fayre's, and may be a visitor at this house presently.'

'Mr. Fayre has prepared me for her coming.'

'Does Miss Fayre know——'

'Nothing.'

'It is possible that the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield may accompany her daughter into Warwickshire. Shall I write and tell them——'

'Please—no,' said Aggie, interrupting her. 'I am not afraid to meet them all. I often think it would be best we should meet.'

'Young Mrs. Dangerfield is very proud.'

'Poor woman!' said Aggie Challis, quietly.

The old lady glanced again curiously and nervously at her companion, before they retraced their steps towards the carriage.

'There would be no occasion to make yourself known, for that matter,' said Mrs. Dangerfield; 'the name of Challis is unfamiliar to Estelle.'

'Have you come to advise me to keep silence, for my shame's sake?' asked Agnes.

'No,' answered the old lady; 'the idea has just occurred to me.'

'I have thought of this meeting longer than yourself, then?' said Aggie Challis. 'My good friend has thought for me, too; and we are prepared to keep our own secret, or to betray it, according to circumstances that may arise.'

'What circumstances?'

Miss Challis did not answer. They were close to the gate again and the footman, chilled to the marrow by his long attendance in the open-air, once more opened the carriage door for his mistress. Once more old Mrs. Dangerfield turned, and the footman closed the door, and swore softly to himself.

'Before I go—another question, Miss Challis.'

'What is that?'

'Your brother—have you heard from him?'

'Ah! poor Sam!—no.'

The tears came readily to the soft eyes, and the old lady saw them.

'He may want a friend sooner than yourself—he may want money, even.'

Aggie shuddered. Yes, he might want money, certainly.

'It is kind of you to think of him,' she said; 'let me thank you in my brother's name.'

There was no excess of gratitude for Mrs. Dangerfield's offer of pecuniary support—a listener might have thought that it had been even coldly received, as one takes a half-meant compliment from a half-hearted acquaintance. Even

Mrs. Dangerfield was not satisfied—the repellant manner, which in Aggie Challis had betrayed itself more than once during the interview, seemed visible again, to check any warmer feeling which the woman who had come back to the world might have felt disposed to show. There was one more inquiring glance towards her, and this time Mrs. Dangerfield turned to her carriage in real earnest.

'Good-day,' she said, when she was in the carriage.

'Good-day,' said Aggie, in response, as the carriage was whirled away, and the withered face, with an expression of regret or disappointment on it, was turned from her.

The young woman was still standing at the gates when the heavy, precise tread of Mr. Fayre warned her of the clergyman's approach.

'Well, Agnes,' he said, gravely; 'has she tempted you to leave us?'

'No.'

'You are not pleased with her coming?'

'Scarcely.'

'She comes as a friend?'

'Or as a spy,' answered Aggie; 'I can scarcely tell which.'

'Is it worth while troubling your mind about it?' asked the minister. 'Is the past worth dwelling upon—with you, brave and strong, and far away from it?'

'It is nearer to me to-day again.'

'Indeed!'

'I'm thinking of it now—and of that woman's share in it. Ah, kind friend!—if I had dared to ask one question of her!'

'What question?'

'Whether it was grief for her son's loss, or remorse for my mother's wrongs, that drove her mad six years ago?'

'Come, Agnes—you must not brood on this again.'

'I think it was remorse,' added Aggie Challis, thoughtfully.

CHAPTER VI.

A MOTHER AROUSED.

THE quiet life of the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield was not in any degree greatly disturbed till the winter of that year, and then the beginning of a new phase in her life broke down the guard over herself suddenly and remarkably. She had lost faith in human kind when she was a young woman, and hope and charity had gone out of her heart about the same time, and left her cold and passionless, despite all the religion with which she believed she was imbued. In her own estimation, she was a woman who had settled down for good—whom the pomps and vanities, and trials and temptations, of a wicked

world were never likely to affect again—and it was at this self-satisfied period of her well-conducted existence that the shock came.

Estelle had been away from home a month. The invitation to spend a few weeks with Isabella Fayre, her old schoolfellow, had been finally accepted, and the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield had acquiesced in the arrangement with an affectation of indifference that threw no particular obstacles in the way.

Estelle might go, if she cared to leave her mother; Estelle's life was dull and depressed; she would find change in Warwickshire, and the change would do her good, young Mrs. Dangerfield trusted. Estelle had not seemed happy of late days; she had grown more thoughtful and reserved than usual; the mother had hoped that close attendance on week-days and Sundays to her devotions had rendered her seriously disposed, until Estelle had intimated one day that the Reverend Edward Smoothly's sermons were all dreadfully alike, and wearisomely monotonous, and thus shocked and distressed her mother by her candour. Estelle and

her maid went away to Warwickshire in the beginning of November, and Lord Redclove, calling upon his daughter Frances a few weeks afterwards, expressed his extreme pleasure at finding his granddaughter free from the maternal care. Lord Redclove was in good spirits that day—he was five years and a half older, but he was five years and a half jauntier, than when Daniel Overdown found him nursing his gout in his defunct son-in-law's study.

Free from gout, Lord Redclove was always jaunty, we may observe; he was a dapper being who treated himself respectfully, and made the best of his age, and called in all the appliances of art to render him, in appearance, a younger man than he was—a very singular mortal this, the reader will see, although there are a few like him hiding in odd corners. On the particular day to which we call attention, his lordship was excessively jaunty—his staid daughter thought him a flippant father even as he sat back in his chair, in his white ulster coat, with a glossy new hat in one neatly-gloved hand, and a gold-headed cane in the other.

'I am very glad that Estelle has got out of the house for a few weeks, Frances. She was being hipped to death—upon my soul she was,' he said.

His daughter shivered at her father's profanity, but did not comment upon it. Comment on her sire's peculiarities was an experiment which she had given up long ago—it had turned out a terrible failure, and provoked his lordship into scoffing most unseemly at all which was sacred in her eyes, and somewhat laughable in his.

'You forget that Estelle has left me alone.'

'Go after her,' said her father, bluntly, 'pack up and take the train for Warwickshire, too—do your duty to that grim old girl from the madhouse, and see that the money is kept in the family. A little life and energy for once, Frances, would not be amiss even in a saint like yourself.'

'I have no wish to leave town.'

'*Au contraire*, I have no wish to stop in it,' said the father. 'I am going to Brighton to-morrow—will you come to Brighton?'

It was not a warm invitation—he did not

crave for his daughter's company at Brighton—and he was far from disappointed when the widow said, quietly,

'No, thank you.'

'You miss Estelle, then?' he said.

'Yes, I miss her; but if she is happy away from me I am not likely to complain.'

'To be sure not. What the devil—what the deuce, I mean—have you to complain about?' he cried. 'The child wants change of scene, fresh air and fresh faces—everybody does—I do; so don't worry her with any doleful and long-winded epistles. You can't imagine how aggravating they are to anyone enjoying a holiday. Leave her to herself, she is in good hands. Fayre is a clergyman and a gentleman—the name is familiar to me, too, but I can't think how—and Estelle writes home in good spirits, you say.'

'In very good spirits.'

'Well, leave her in them for a change, poor child.'

Lord Redclove went away laughing at his not too complimentary advice, and his daughter

dressed for church immediately afterwards. When she returned, there was a letter from Estelle awaiting her, but she did not read it till late in the evening. She knew what the letter would contain; glowing comments upon the writer's happiness, her new friends, her rides, and drives, and walks—about everything save her regrets at being absent from home—an outlook at her bright life in the country, but never a glance at the silent mother in her grand and lonely house in town. And Estelle had been away four weeks.

When she opened the letter, however, a piece of news exploded at her from the elegant spider-like scrawl which the finishing governess had given her daughter—and there was less serenity in the breast of the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield than she had known for years. She did not sleep that night, and early next morning, before her father was out of bed, she had surprised his town mansion by a visit. Half-an-hour afterwards Lord Redclove, in an elaborate dressing-gown, shuffled into the room with a wild stare upon his countenance. Frances, the

picture of misery, was sitting opposite her nephew Hamilton, just as he had expected to find her. Only calamity could have brought Frances to his house at that early hour. Somebody was dead, perhaps.

'Now, if anything is the matter, Frances,' he said, as he entered, 'break it to me gently, for God's sake. I don't want to be shattered to pieces by anything terrible and uncomfortable being blurted out incautiously. What is it?'

'Read that,' said his daughter, putting Estelle's letter into his hand.

'Ahem!—yes—but really, Frances, I cannot see the absolute necessity of reading all this,' he said, glancing ruefully at the closely-written epistle, 'my glasses are upstairs, too, and—Hamilton, will you do me the favour to tell me, in your own prudent way, what *has* happened to disturb your cousin in this fashion?'

'One paragraph in Estelle's letter will explain it all,' said Hamilton, coolly.

'Thank Heaven. Proceed,' said his lordship,

dropping carefully into an easy chair by the fire, and clasping his delicate hands round one knee, 'it is not particularly distressing, I presume.'

'Only to me,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, bitterly.

'My dear child, you take the affairs of life in too grave a spirit,' said Lord Redclove, 'pray allow Hamilton to proceed. I think when he has thrown some light upon the business which has dragged me from my rest'—it was ten a.m. by the great bronze clock on the mantelpiece—'I shall be able to offer an opinion that may be of material service to you.'

The daughter regarded her father almost scornfully, but did not hazard a reply. With an impatient hand she signed to Hamilton to proceed.

'Miss Fayre's companion,' began Hamilton, quoting from the letter in his hand, 'has improved vastly on further acquaintance—I like her very much now—I love her quite as well as Bella Fayre—she is much kinder and more thoughtful than my light-hearted schoolfellow

—she wins upon me wonderfully—she——'

'Excuse me, Hamilton—Frances,' said Lord Redclove, in mild bewilderment, 'but who is Miss Fayre's companion?'

'It is the first time that Estelle has alluded to her,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield.

'Ah, that is like a woman. I beg pardon for stopping you, Hamilton,' said his lordship, 'there's not a great deal more of it, I suppose?'

'Not a great deal more, my lord,' said Hamilton, drily.

'I don't see anything remarkably exciting in the communication at present,' observed Lord Redclove—'pray proceed.'

Hamilton continued his reading, thus adjured.

'"She is odd and strange at times, and says odd, quaint things; but you, my dear mamma, are sure to like her. When Bella pays me her return visit in town, I should like Aggie Challis to come with her. She is everybody's favourite in Warwickshire—she will be yours in London, I feel certain."'

Lord Redclove let go his knee suddenly, and brought his foot amongst the fire-irons, but his his face betrayed no very deep concern.

'You hear—you understand,' said his daughter, as she took from Hamilton's hands the letter which he had re-folded—'you see the miserable complication of all this?'

'There are more Challises than one in the world, Frances,' he said, slowly; 'I do not quite comprehend why you should associate this companion with——'

'Ask Hamilton what he thinks,' cried Frances.

'My dear,' said Lord Redclove, in grave reproof, 'I am telling you what *I* think, if you will kindly give me your attention for a moment.'

But the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield was not disposed to wait for her father's opinion on the subject.

'It is clear enough,' said Frances, speaking very rapidly, 'Hamilton met Mr. Fayre in Liverpool; he was chaplain of the gaol where the girl Agnes Challis was imprisoned for two years—he has been always interested in her—

what doubt can there be that this girl is the same?'

'Ah! yes. I comprehend now. Take it coolly, Frances—don't make a noise. The whole affair is easily arranged.'

'I don't see how,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, despairingly.

'This Agnes Challis has not related the story of her parentage—of her life—to your daughter, it is evident. She is ashamed of it, and she is discreet. Telegraph to Estelle to return home immediately.'

'Yes, yes; I have thought of that,' cried the mother, 'but those two have met. At any moment Estelle may learn of her father's dishonour, and I have kept his memory so free from reproach. She may learn the history of all this misery and crime at any moment.'

'Therefore, telegraph at once,' said her father.

'Estelle will wonder what has happened—they will talk at the vicarage—take offence, perhaps—the whole crisis may be precipitated. This Mr. Fayre—who must have seen the position from the first—may be the very man to

disclose the truth—may be even anxious to disclose it.'

'Mr. Fayre has acted like a fool, or a scamp,' said Lord Redclove; 'as a man of the world, he might have known better; as a minister, he —he——'

'Never mind Mr. Fayre just now,' said his daughter, impatiently; 'how can I get Estelle away from his house without a scene?'

'Go down and fetch her. Hamilton will accompany you as escort, I am sure—he has always more time on his hands than he knows what to do with—take her by surprise, and whisk her off to her grandmother's, by way of an excuse. The old woman will be glad to see you, and you can get back to town as soon as you like, and cut the acquaintance of those infernal Fayres for ever afterwards. As for exciting yourself about it,' added her father, 'I don't see the policy.'

'I thought if you had gone with me—Estelle is fond of you—she might have fancied——'

'My dear, I am going to Brighton this afternoon,' said Lord Redclove; 'I dine with Lord

Miniver there. I have an important appointment for to-morrow—it is absolutely impossible that I shall be disengaged for a moment until the middle of next week. I cannot run about the country in this way, but Hamilton will be pleased to be of service.'

'Hamilton will not,' said Mrs. Dangerfield, sadly.

'Eh—what—why not?' And Lord Redclove looked from his distressed daughter to the moody countenance of the young man opposite.

'It is not Hamilton's business, and he will not care for a journey so purposeless to him.'

'Hamilton can speak for himself,' said Lord Redclove, severely; 'he has a pretty fair habit of doing so at times.'

'I have one or two engagements for this week,' said Hamilton, unmoved by these comments; 'and, candidly, I have no great wish to break them, and run down to Warwickshire instead; but, if my cousin requires my services, they are at her disposal.'

'There, Hamilton says he'll go; what more do you want?' said his lordship, with alacrity.

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield looked very strangely and mournfully at Hamilton, and Lord Redclove glanced from one to another with a jackdaw-like sharpness, as if a new light were dawning upon him. He was very silent, however, and he turned to the fire, and warmed his hands carefully, back and front.

'I will go willingly—cheerfully—if you wish it,' Hamilton said, with more earnestness.

'I shall be obliged, if you will,' replied Frances. 'I do not feel strong-minded enough to go alone. And if—if—you could spare the time, it will be one more favour conferred, Hamilton, for which I shall be grateful.'

'I will go when you wish, Frances.'

'To-day—this afternoon?'

'Yes. I will call for you in two hours' time.'

'Thank you.'

Thus it was arranged, and the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield hastened to her own home to make the necessary preparations for her journey.

Lord Redclove sat and studied his nephew for awhile from under his dyed eyebrows.

'Why didn't you care to escort Frances to Warwickshire?' he asked.

'I don't like Warwickshire.'

'Or Frances?'

'I am very fond of Frances.'

'And of Frances' daughter—Estelle?'

Hamilton's face darkened. He was not partial to being cross-examined, and his uncle's manner was not pleasant or gracious. It had altered of late days to him, he fancied—just as he had altered to his uncle, perhaps. Well—well—people cannot help their hearts changing, hardening, or softening, and he was the last individual to be surprised at the mutation. He was only surprised at his uncle's leading questions, and he elevated *his* eyebrows—not dyed—by way of silent protest against them. Still he answered his uncle at once.

'No, my lord, not fond of Estelle in any remarkable degree.'

'So Frances informed me, some months back.'

'Indeed!'

'She wishes you had been, though. Is not that it?'

'I don't know—I cannot say that,' replied Hamilton.

'You might have done worse,' said Lord Redclove, 'than make love to Estelle Dangerfield. She will have all her mother's money; she is a clever and agreeable girl. I should like to see you settled in life, and settled well.'

'Thank you very kindly,' said his nephew, a trifle too gratefully; 'but I am not looking for an excellent match, and I hardly like the idea of my friends looking out for me.'

'Who is looking out?' asked the nobleman, sharply.

'No one, I hope,' answered Hamilton.

'I simply said you might do worse than marry my grand-daughter,' said his uncle; 'but I would not take the liberty of advising you on a matter so delicate, and one on which you are so eminently qualified to judge for yourself,' he added, with no small amount of mock politeness.

'I shall certainly judge for myself,' said Hamilton.

'And will judge well, and in good time,' said Lord Redclove, more genially; 'for you are a

shrewd fellow in your way, a man of the world, and admirably unromantic.'

'I shall never marry for love.'

'Love is a delusion, Hamilton; a complete mirage.'

'And I shall never marry for money,' his nephew added.

'Then what the devil will you marry for?' asked the uncle.

'Position I shall not care about; Parliamentary distinction is out of my line,' continued Hamilton, in the same listless fashion. 'I have as little ambition in my nature as affection.'

'You haven't much affection, certainly,' observed his uncle, 'but ambition will come as you grow older. At least, I hope to see you a different man, and in a different sphere,' he added, after a pause.

Hamilton's dark eyes were fixed upon his uncle, who turned away his head somewhat beneath the gaze bestowed upon him. Lord Redclove had a reason for talking thus, for hinting thus, and he saw that Hamilton saw it also. He did not pursue the conversation; he

had no desire to bore his nephew to death. He disliked discussion, and he was going to Brighton.

It was strange that the subject of Agnes Challis was not mentioned by either of these men again, that Lord Redclove left his nephew without a word as to the unlooked-for advent of this young woman upon the scene once more. He had no instructions to offer Hamilton now; he imagined—very vainly in this instance—that his daughter understood the position, and would act for herself wisely. He had done with the Challises completely; they had had their chances offered them some years ago, and had refused, as he thought, all offers of support; and there was an end of any interest in their career.

He was restless, however—restless upon another subject, it seemed. Before he went back to his dressing-room, he said,

'May I ask one question, Hamilton, without giving you offence?'

'Certainly,' answered Hamilton.

'Did not Frances request you some little while ago not to call at her house too frequently?'

'Yes.'

'It was very foolish of her. It was very weak,' said Lord Redclove, tetchily; 'it was letting you see too clearly that she had grave anxieties about Estelle, and fearful of your engaging her affections without your own being enlisted in return. It was lowering Estelle's character, and making you vainer than you are.'

'Very likely,' was the quiet response.

Hamilton had answered the one question which his uncle had put to him; to the after comments of his relative he did not care to respond. He was a reticent being, whom it had been always difficult to draw out or to understand. Time was rendering him sullen, and eccentric, too, his uncle thought; and that he did not improve was fairly evident.

However, he was amiable enough to escort his first cousin the widow to Grayling. Without a note of warning, Frances Dangerfield and Hamilton were close upon the vicarage at eight in the evening of that day. The lights were bright within as they approached the house, and restless figures passed and cast their shadows on the blinds.

'A party,' said Hamilton, looking from the window of the post-carriage. 'This is awkward. Had we not better postpone our visit till the morning?'

'No.'

'There is no occasion for a scene, for anything dramatic,' he observed.

'Oh! Hamilton, you might have spared me that taunt. My drama was ended long ago,' she answered, 'and my only wish is to be at peace with the world and—Estelle.'

'Still this is a surprise for them within—a *coup de théâtre*,' said Hamilton; 'and the morning would be preferable for an attack on the enemy's camp.'

'She shall not stay another night beneath that roof,' said Mrs. Dangerfield, firmly. 'I am resolved.'

'Very well,' said Hamilton.

He assisted his cousin to alight, and they both went along the garden-path towards the door of the vicarage. Before they had reached the house, the door opened, and two gentlemen stepped into the keen, frosty air; the taller one bareheaded.

'You think that she——' Then Mr. Fayre, for it was he, caught sight of the approaching visitors, and came with long strides towards them.

'Mrs. Dangerfield,' he said, to that lady's surprise.

'Yes, I am Mrs. Dangerfield. Are you Mr. Fayre?'

'Yes, madam.'

'You appear to expect me!'

'To be sure,' was the reply. 'You received my telegram this afternoon, I hope?'

'Telegram—what telegram? I have received no—— Oh! sir, is anything the matter? Has anything happened to—to Estelle?' cried the mother.

'I am very sorry to say "yes,"' answered the clergyman.

CHAPTER VII.

EXPLANATION.

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield was not strong enough for this sudden blow. She had arrived at Grayling smarting under a sense of injury, of personal slight, that had wholly disturbed the apathy of which she was proud, and which she was even inclined to consider as a Christian serenity of the very best quality. She had prepared herself for a withering comment on Mr. Fayre's behaviour; she had rehearsed the most cutting speeches and the most indignant reproaches, all the way from the railway station at Paddington to Warwick, and here at the onset was she met by news which utterly prostrated her. Mrs. Dangerfield fainted away.

She remembered no more. The vicarage with its lighted windows, the frost and snow of the night, the figures about her all vanished suddenly, and when she opened her eyes again she was lying on a couch in a neatly furnished drawing-room with a little dark-eyed, dark-haired young lady bending over her, and a portly man of fifty sitting by her side with his hand upon her pulse.

'She will do now, Miss Fayre,' she heard the doctor say, 'she is coming round,' and then she came round very slowly, and the hard fact by which she had been overwhelmed came round also with her consciousness. A glass of cold brandy and water was held to her lips; she drank a little of the liquid, and then said, in a weak voice,

'Where is Estelle? Tell me about her.'

'There is no great cause for alarm now,' said the doctor; 'your daughter will be quite herself in a few days—with care, and without undue excitement,' he added, by way of caution to the mother.

'Tell me what has happened to her?' asked

Mrs. Dangerfield, sitting up, 'I am quite prepared.'

'Miss Fayre, I will leave the news for you to communicate,' said the doctor, bowing low to the ladies before he took his departure. When he had gone, Mrs. Dangerfield wished that she had asked him to stay, wished that she had heard all the news from his lips, rather than from the daughter of the man who had so cruelly deceived her. She turned eagerly to Bella Fayre, however, and the bright little brunette, facing her, dashed immediately into explanation, rattling away at a great pace, as if in a hurry to get through her task as speedily as possible.

'You see it was a skating-party—on the river, across the fields at the back here, Mrs. Dangerfield,' galloped on Miss Fayre, 'we have been there day after day. Oh! ever since the frost set in and the ice was safe. There was a thaw last night, but it froze again this morning, and we had not thought of any difference in the ice, until it gave way suddenly, where poor Estelle was skating, and let her through into the water.'

'Merciful heaven!'

'It's all right now—think, to begin with, please, Mrs. Dangerfield, that it's all right now. But I shall never forget it,' cried the girl, her dark eyes dilating and her colour deepening on her cheeks, 'for Estelle sank twice, screaming for the help we could not give her—that no one would risk his life to offer her, though there were five-and-twenty people, at least, the great big cowards. I was one of that lot—I could not move hand or foot—I could only cry and scream and rave like a little lunatic—scream the louder every time she clung to the ice, which broke away bit by bit in her poor hands. But,' seeing Mrs. Dangerfield's colour desert her again, 'don't forget she's all right now, please. She was saved by Aggie Challis—our brave Aggie. When no one else had an ounce of courage in them, she dashed across the ice, and went in with her, too. Oh! such another crash, but she held her up and clutched at the ice, and when it broke she followed it up again, and never let go of Estelle till the help came for which we were all praying, shouting, and

screaming. Some men brought ropes at last, and they were saved—both saved, thank God!'

Bella Fayre was excited at her own description, and clapped her hands loudly at the conclusion of her narrative. The doctor had hardly been discreet in leaving so high pressure a young woman as this was to break the news to the mother, but Mrs. Dangerfield bore the details, thus energetically and even dramatically given, with tolerable composure, and only said, meekly,

'Yes, yes, thank God for all His mercy.'

Then she seemed to remember that this was Mr. Fayre's daughter, and that to Mr. Fayre she might be cold and distant presently, for she added, in a very different tone,

'Where is my child?'

'In her room,' was the reply. 'She is a little feverish; she has not got over the shock yet, but she will be better in the morning, Mr. Poulton says.'

'She is conscious?'

'Oh, yes, quite conscious.'

'I am relieved in mind.'

'But she will talk of it all,' added Bella Fayre, 'over and over and over again, though we try our hardest to keep her quiet. It is only Aggie who can manage her. That is why I am down here out of the way. I am a blunderer, a complete nuisance; I always was a thoroughly useless young woman,' she said, with a naïve belief in her own helplessness that a less anxious listener would have smiled at.

'Aggie,' repeated Frances Dangerfield, slowly; 'that, I presume, is Miss Challis, who——'

'Who saved Estelle's life,' cried Miss Fayre, impulsively interrupting her. '*She* is well and strong again; she was her own dear strong self an hour afterwards. You will be glad to see her, won't you, to thank her for the courage which brought your daughter back to the world. I'll fetch her at once.'

'No, no; not yet,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, faintly, like one overpowered by this rush of eloquence; 'give me time, please, to think of this more Where is Hamilton?'

'Is that the gentleman who came with you this evening?' inquired Bella.

Frances Dangerfield responded in the affirmative.

'He is in papa's study, with papa. Shall I say you wish to see him?'

'Yes, please. That is, no—not yet,' replied the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, irresolutely; 'I—I must see Estelle first. You are keeping her from me. Oh! she is worse than you say, I am sure of it.' And, full of this new suspicion, she started to her feet.

'She is recovering slowly, Mrs. Dangerfield,' replied Bella Fayre; 'but, pray, remember what the doctor has just told us. Estelle requires care, and freedom from excitement. You will wait a little while, I hope.'

'I can be trusted with my own child, Miss Fayre,' said the jealous mother; 'no one has a right to keep her from me.'

'Certainly not; Aggie—Miss Challis, that is—had better break the news to her that you *are* here, then,' said Bella, rising and retiring rapidly from the room.

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield looked as if she were half-disposed to follow her, half inclined even to suspect some excuse for longer delay in the sudden withdrawal of the vicar's daughter from her presence. She did not sit down again after the door had closed upon her, but paced the room slowly, with her white hands wrung together, and her thoughtful gaze directed to the pattern of Mr. Fayre's drab carpet. She was in distress; she knew not what to do or how to act; events seemed marching upon her too quickly and from too many sides for her woman's strength to cope with; Estelle could not be taken from the vicarage that night, and she, Estelle's mother, was a woman in the way there. What a time they were returning to her, she thought, fretfully; where was Hamilton? Why did Mr. Fayre keep out of her way? Ah! no; she need not wonder at that; but why did not his daughter come down again from the sick-room, and tell her that Estelle was eager to see her, to clasp her to her bosom, and to shed tears of gratitude with her over the mercy that had been extended to them both.

She paused on the hearth-rug to consider again the means by which Estelle had been saved; she rested her clasped hands on the mantel-shelf, and looked into the fire for the rest of the story—how it would continue, and in what way it would end? and the door opened noiselessly, and without her knowledge, and she who had saved Estelle came close to her side before she was aware of it.

'Mrs. Dangerfield,' said a soft voice, and the widow looked round quickly, and faced Agnes Challis for the first time in her life. Even then she did not associate the new-comer with her husband's daughter by another woman; this tall, graceful girl, with the fair hair and the soft, winning eyes, was probably a lady born and bred, a friend of the Fayres and of Estelle's. For Estelle had made many new friends in Warwickshire; her letters home assured her of that fact; she had been more full of information concerning her fresh acquaintances than of solicitude as to how the mother was getting on in solitude without her. She had been very thoughtless, possibly a trifle selfish, as girls will

be now and then, when their hearts are light and people are making a fuss over them; and here was another new denizen of Estelle's new world. And yet the lady was no new arrival, she was one of the family; by her dress and manner she was at home there.

'You will excuse my introducing myself, Mrs. Dangerfield, as I have left Mrs. Fayre watching your daughter,' said Aggie, speaking very calmly, but looking very intently at the visitor. 'I am Agnes Challis.'

'You are Agnes Challis,' was the slow echo back; and then the two women looked at each other long and steadily before exchanging another word.

CHAPTER VIII.

HIS CHILD.

AGNES CHALLIS was the first to break the spell of a long silence. She had never lost her self-possession; she had seen that the mother of the prostrate girl upstairs was less strong than herself, for all the pride of her position, and the grandeur and uprightness of her life. The colour had deepened in the elder woman's face; it had seemed to burn itself in there at the first announcement of Aggie's name, and it did not die away again. There was no advance to friendliness exhibited; in the first moments of their interview, the mother forgot that this was the young woman who had saved the life of her child, and remembered only the cruelty of her

own past life, and the bitterness of the present interview.

'I thought it best to come unannounced,' Agnes said, 'and tell you that Miss Dangerfield is asleep, and it would not be wise to wake her.'

'I cannot see her, then?' said the mother, in a low, suppressed tone of voice.

'When she wakes, she will be very glad to see you,' said Aggie; 'she has been talking of you a great deal, and wondering how long a time it would take for you to reach her.'

'She is worse than Miss Fayre would have me believe,' cried the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield. 'I know it!'

'She has had a great shock to her system, the doctor says, and that is all.'

'She *is* in danger!'

'No, I think not,' was the reply.

'Then, why all this precaution,' urged the mother, 'this fear of seeing my own child?'

'There is no fear of your seeing her, only of your waking her from the first sleep she has had since the accident,' Aggie explained, still

very calmly; 'let me advise you to be patient.'

'*You* advise me to patience!' murmured Mrs. Dangerfield, almost scornfully.

She was fretful and restless, and only an ordinary woman; perhaps less than one, after all. Aggie Challis felt the taunt that was conveyed more by the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield's manner than by her answer, and the change was great in her from that instant. She seemed to grow taller and straighter, and a sudden rigidity of features betokened that Agnes Challis had a temper of her own, or at least was a heroine not disposed to swallow complacently every indignity that might meet her full front, as extra meek heroines have a fine habit of doing.

'Yes, I advise you, Mrs. Dangerfield,' she said, in a clear, hard tone of voice. 'You will excuse the liberty I take, but it is for your daughter's good as well as your own.'

'Well, well, perhaps it is,' replied the widow, as she sat down again and sighed wearily.

'I offer this as an explanation, not as an apology,' added Aggie, for fear that she had

been misunderstood. 'The doctor has gone, or I should not have intruded upon your troubles, madam, even to explain. That could have been done more gracefully by others in this house, and would have been more acceptable to you. Good evening.'

Very upright still, but a shade paler than when she had entered the room, Agnes Challis walked towards the door. She had not touched the handle when Mrs. Dangerfield said,

'One moment.'

Aggie paused, hesitated, and returned to her place by the mantelpiece. There was something in the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield's face that betokened distress of mind, incertitude, pain; and the younger woman went back to meet it and to answer it, if necessary.

'If I have been rude, forgive me,' said Frances. 'I am not myself; I have been ill-prepared for all that has happened to-day. There has been a great deception practised upon me, and I have travelled to Grayling to resent it, and to take Estelle home; and then the shock of the bad news has come all at once

like this. I do not wish to hurt your feelings, Miss Challis. I—I—remember with gratitude that my only child would not be living now but for your courage and presence of mind, and I thank you with my whole heart for her rescue. But——' She came to a full stop, and her listener said, quickly,

'You are about to say that my saving of your daughter's life does not atone for my presence here, for my acquaintance with Miss Dangerfield, for becoming almost—I say almost—her friend. Well, my atonement for that affront to you may be offered at a time more fitting, and when I have sufficiently considered the method of expiation which may be most acceptable to you. Still'—there was a little hesitation here —'it was not my wish to know your daughter that kept me in this house; and let me assure you that, from the beginning to the end, she has been spared the humiliation of blushing for her sister's existence. Yes, Mrs. Dangerfield, her sister's,' added Agnes, emphatically—'and there is no shrinking from that fact as easily as you shrink from me.'

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield was bewildered utterly. The speaker's pride was greater than her own, and its scorn beat down all opposition, and left her defenceless. She was not prepared for so sudden an outburst, for this ready resentment of the first words of disparagement, of reproach, which had escaped her. The high-spirited, sharp-tongued young woman before her was a surprise and an incomprehensibility, and her character was beyond all fathoming to-night. The elder woman was strangely humble, too—her own humility amazed her afterwards, when she had leisure to reflect upon the interview.

'I have intended no offence—for any hasty word that has escaped me, I am sorry,' murmured the widow. 'I do not know that you are in any way to blame, and I did not expect you would be so quick to answer me.'

'I have been brooding upon this for many years,' was the reply; 'I thought you would meet me in this fashion—you, a lady, very unforgiving, and I, the child of a poor woman whom your husband wronged. Still, had you

come to-morrow,' she added, 'I should have spared you a painful interview—spared myself.'

She passed from the room, and there was no effort made to arrest her progress again. The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield was glad to be alone, to consider how her own self-esteem had been crushed, and her forces utterly routed, by a girl whom a word should have set down, but whose pride and indignation had defeated hers.

How long she sat there thinking out her plan of action, and finding it more complicated than she had bargained for—nay, discovering it hopelessly involved by the daughter's illness, and the kindness shown in the enemy's camp, where Estelle was—she never knew. Hours or minutes might have passed before Mr. Fayre and Hamilton Redclove came into the room, and a servant was bustling about at a side-table with the tea-equipage.

She noticed that Hamilton was looking very grave, and her fears leaped to the old conclusion as he advanced.

'They are deceiving me, Hamilton,' she said,

in a quick whisper. 'She is worse than they would have me believe.'

'No, she is not,' replied Hamilton, almost bluntly. 'Don't get nervous about it again, Frances. It's all right.'

'But——'

'Mr. Fayre wishes to speak to you, I think,' said Hamilton, interrupting her; then he walked away to the mantelpiece, and feigned an interest in some old Dresden china that was there.

'Your daughter is awake, Mrs. Dangerfield, and knows you are here,' said Mr. Fayre. 'Miss Challis has broken the news to her with great gentleness.'

'And Estelle?'

'Is anxious to see you. After tea, if——'

'I will see her now, please. Don't keep me from her any longer,' said the feverish mother.

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield was on her feet, and the clergyman opened the door for her, and followed her from the room. He led the way up the broad, old-fashioned stairs to the chamber where Estelle was lying, pausing

at the door, and pushing it open softly for her. Frances Dangerfield passed into the room, and went swiftly to the bed-side, to look down at her child, and to moan over and kiss her.

'My poor, dear Estelle—my own darling,' she cried, 'why did you come here?—what a terrible calamity!'

'It might have been, without our Aggie—that's all,' said Estelle, in a faint voice.

'And, as it is, it was only a good ducking,' said the crisp voice of Bella Fayre from the fireside. 'Something to laugh at presently, Estelle. Why, I have had half a dozen hearty laughs at it already, Mrs. Dangerfield.'

'Miss Fayre is easily amused,' remarked the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, coldly.

'Bella has not laughed yet, to my knowledge,' was the quick response of the daughter; 'she has been very kind and attentive. You must not mind what my friend says in her high spirits—which are put on to keep up mine. For, oh! I was very frightened, mamma—I seemed so near death all at once—until a brave girl risked her life for mine, and saved me. Bella, where is

Aggie?—mamma would like to see her immediately, I am sure.'

'I have seen her already, Estelle,' replied the mother, quickly.

'I am glad of that. Is she not kind, and thoughtful, and gentle?' she asked, in a lower voice, 'and so different from the rest of us.'

'Estelle, I am getting jealous,' cried Bella. 'As if I would not have saved you myself, if my knees had not knocked together with fright—as if anybody could not have saved you! only Aggie was in a greater hurry than other people.'

Bella laughed again, and Estelle's face brightened with the music in her laugh, but the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield remained preternaturally solemn. This turning Estelle's accident into a jest was not consolatory to the feelings of the mother, and she was not quick-witted enough to see the reason for it. She wished to kneel and thank Heaven for her daughter's life being spared—she had not calmed down yet, and there was tragedy before her rather than comedy. That there should be a humorous side to the calamity was past the compre-

hension of the woman who had travelled many miles that day to fetch her daughter home. Miss Fayre probably meant all for the best, but Mrs. Dangerfield was astonished at her lightness and frivolity—a minister's daughter, too—astonished, also, at her want of feeling for the nerves of the mother, still discomposed and shattered.

'I will leave you two together,' said Bella, suddenly, awaking to the consciousness that she was in the way; 'but Mrs. Dangerfield will remember that Mr. Poulton hoped Estelle would be kept quite calm to-night.'

'I have not forgotten the warning, Miss Fayre. Estelle'—to her daughter—'I hope my presence does not excite you.'

'Not at all, mamma; why should it?' answered Estelle.

'Your young friend distrusts me as your nurse,' she said, severely; 'estimates my self-possession and my prudence at a very low value, I fear.'

'To tell you the truth, I haven't thought about them, Mrs. Dangerfield,' answered Bella, with unpleasant frankness; 'you were excited

and nervous downstairs, and, having been warned to be careful of Estelle, I thought it was as well to warn you with the rest.'

'I had only heard the news a minute before,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, in the same severe tone of voice, 'and was naturally shocked at it—otherwise,' she added, 'I am not an excitable woman, or one unaccustomed to meet trouble. I have as strong nerves as most people, have encountered as much affliction, and borne my cross without complaint.'

The voice shook a little, although there was a faint ring of pride in it. One can be proud even of more than a fair share of calamity, and the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield was disposed to plume herself on the troubles she had had and lived down, at a time when life should have been bright with her. She had even thought herself above feeling very deeply again, having faith in heaven, and a belief in a soul that was above the petty vanities and puny strugglings of this lower world; and she was nettled that at the first ordinary shock to her mortality she had given the impression to others that she was

a nervous and excitable woman. She had not kept to her own high standard of repose; but then, here was an only daughter in danger, and time had not been given her to prepare for the blow. With time before her—time for her pride to grow strong and herself to seek comfort in prayer—she would have amazed these people, who had taken so false an estimate of her character for philosophy. Poor woman! she was only deceiving herself, after all, and this was the beginning of a greater trouble, which she would be no stronger to resist than the rest of earth's weaklings, dashed helplessly by the force of the storm against the rocks hemming them in.

Bella Fayre had nothing to reply to the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield's remarks. She looked shyly at her, as a young woman will at her senior who talks suddenly of trials that she has not had, and religion for which she is not prepared, and it was only at the door that she said,

'I will send Miss Challis to you presently.'

'Pray, do not,' said the mother at once; 'I

would prefer to sit up with Estelle to-night. I must insist upon it.'

'But you have had a long journey, and——'

'I have quite made up my mind, Miss Fayre,' said Frances Dangerfield, cutting short the discussion which was impending, 'and, if you will kindly give instructions to the servant to bring me a cup of tea presently, I shall be obliged.'

'Yes; but——'

And then Bella Fayre departed in a hurry, and sought out Aggie Challis, whom she found in her own room packing a few things into a small trunk.

'Hollo!' she said, not too elegantly, 'what are *you* doing?'

'I am going away for a few days,' was the reply.

'What!—why?' exclaimed Bella.

'To make room for Mrs. Dangerfield, who will be naturally anxious to attend to her daughter herself.'

'A pretty one to attend upon Estelle, she is.'

'Bella, what do you mean?' asked Aggie Challis.

'I mean that I don't like Mrs. Dangerfield's manner at all—that she's not my style. She—she's a *caution*, Ag, and no mistake!' she added, confidentially.

CHAPTER IX.

'NURSING.'

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield left to herself, and impressed with a sense of the importance of the duties she had voluntarily chosen, subsided by degrees into her usual calm demeanour, and was presently at home in her daughter's apartment. She took off her heavy fur mantle, smoothed her hair, still glossy and abundant, before the dressing-glass, stirred the fire softly, and then went back to Estelle's side and looked wistfully and affectionately at her.

'You are not sorry I am your nurse to-night, Estelle?' she asked, solicitously.

'No,' was the answer; 'is it likely I should be sorry?'

'I don't know, hardly,' said the mother, 'but you—you have grown strangely fond of these people—you have become used to their ways, which,' with a sigh, 'are not my ways.'

'They have been very kind to me, all of them. They have cheered me a great deal, and I was dull and out of sorts when I first came,' said Estelle. 'I shall have a great deal to tell you of the kindness, of the happiness there is in this house, and which they have been anxious I should share.'

She had been happier here than with the mother at home, the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield thought—and she would have implied this bitterly at another time, and with Estelle's health less on her mind. Estelle had met youth and girl's affection in this place; life and life's pursuits had been different and brighter—it had not been all prayer-meetings and church-going day after day, as it had been in town.

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield was pained, but she was extremely cautious.

'I am glad you have been happy, Estelle,' she said, although tears were trembling on her lashes; 'you make me almost sorry to take you back to London.'

'I did not say I had been particularly happy,' replied Estelle, with a little sigh; 'on the contrary, I am afraid I have been particularly heavy. I am not sorry to return with you, mamma,' and the fair hot hand was stretched out from the coverlet towards her, 'only sorry that the friends I have made here cannot come back with me.'

'Are you so fond of them?'

'Well,' she said, hesitatingly, 'I haven't any friends in town.'

'You forget the Reverend Mr. Slow, and Mr. Smoothly, and Mr. McOffertory,' said the mother, in mild reproach, 'and—and your grandpapa, and—Hamilton.'

She wished that she had not mentioned the name the instant it had escaped her—the girl's face flushed so deep a crimson, and the hand

resting on her own trembled so instinctively. But she had reached the end of her circle of visiting acquaintances, and it struck her that Estelle had received the list with wonderful apathy. There was a moment's pause, and then the daughter said, softly,

'Has he called lately to see—you, mamma?'

'Now and then—for a few minutes.'

'Has he—has he asked after me, at any time?'

'Oh, yes.'

'He is well, I hope?'

'Yes, very well.'

'And as discontented with his position—as he always is, poor Hamilton. Ah! I should like to see him,' she said, with another faint sigh.

'If you are better to-morrow—which you will be, Estelle, with God's blessing—you will not have to go to London to see him. He has accompanied me to Warwickshire.'

'Has he?' cried the girl, her eyes sparkling with a tell-tale brightness, 'oh! I am glad of that. It was very kind of him to come all this way with you.'

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield's face shadowed again at her daughter's excitement. She had distracted Estelle's attention from her new friends, but she had said too much about Hamilton. Estelle, she feared, nay, she knew, was hopelessly in love with a young fellow who had not given her a fond thought—who had been always kind and cousinly to her, but had remained terribly heart-whole, when this secluded young woman had taken to worshipping him for a hero, and building on every petty compliment as upon an avowal of attachment. She had hardly made an effort to conceal from her mother that Hamilton Redclove was very dear to her—she had pined for him, even fretted for him at last, when he had suddenly and ungraciously dropped his visits to the square: she had been of late days so great an anxiety to the mother that the change offered in Warwickshire even seemed necessary for her safety. At home the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield could not, would not, offer her society's distractions; she had given up the world in her heart, and most of the world's vanities—not all of them!

—and this country vicarage, she had hoped, might bring peace and resignation when Estelle had completely mastered the fact that Hamilton was never likely to ask her to become his wife. That little difficulty in the way of a proper understanding had, perhaps, hardly been surmounted yet, for Estelle still nourished one or two romantic ideas, born of much surreptitious novel-reading, and fancy musings of her own.

'You must try to rest now, dear,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, 'it is getting late, and you are not to talk too much.'

'I shall be glad when it is day,' said Estelle.

'Try to sleep now, for my sake.'

'I have not seen Aggie yet.'

'Aggie!' exclaimed her mother, resentfully.

'We call her Aggie in the house she brightens. You forget she and I have become stanch friends, mamma.'

'You two?' said Frances, shuddering.

'Yes.'

'I was afraid of this,' the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield whispered to herself.

'And I think she likes me,' Estelle continued, 'quiet and dull and odd as I am. I can never forget—neither must you, mamma—that she has saved my life at the hazard of her own, and that it was for love of me she did it.'

'Yes, yes—a brave girl,' said the mother; 'but try to sleep now, Estelle, or they will blame me for being here, and letting you talk like this.'

She walked from the bedside to the chair by the fire, and Estelle closed her eyes and drifted into dreamland by imperceptible degrees. When the daughter was asleep, the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield sat and studied the old position again, and wondered afresh how she should act, and how it would end? She did not wish to appear ungrateful, uncharitable, resentful of a slight that had suddenly become very vague and misty, and might have never been intentional; but it was patent to her mind that it had been a great mistake to allow Estelle to come to Mr. Fayre's vicarage. The sooner that was remedied the better.

When the maid-servant had brought in the

tea to the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield and quietly retired, the house seemed to settle down for the night; but at a later hour, when the widow was reading a Testament she had found on the toilet-table, Miss Fayre came in again to offer assistance, to suggest the visitor taking some rest, to harass her, in fact, with fifty suggestions to all of which but scant attention was paid.

'I am not fatigued; I am very wakeful. Kindly leave me with my charge,' were Frances Dangerfield's replies.

'Good-night, then.'

'Good-night.'

'I think all is well there,' said Bella Fayre, pointing to the sleeper.

'Yes, thank heaven.'

Bella Fayre retired, and the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield watched through the night without betraying any sign of weariness. In the early morning Estelle awoke with a start, and forgetful of the mother for an instant.

'Aggie, are you there?' she said, in a quick voice.

'It is I, my dear—your mamma. You have not forgotten I am with you?'

'Ah! yes, yes; I remember now,' said Estelle, 'I thought for the moment Aggie Challis was taking care of me, as she promised that she would.'

She dozed off again with these words upon her lips, and when the morning dawned—a fine, bright, frosty morning which the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield peered at through the window-blinds—she was sleeping soundly. It was seven in the morning, and Estelle not yet awake, when Aggie Challis stole softly into the room. She was equipped for a journey, and Mrs. Dangerfield regarded her with surprise.

'Asleep?' Agnes asked, with a gesture towards the bed.

Frances nodded.

'I will not disturb her,' she said, in a whisper, 'I am going away now.'

'Going away?' repeated the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield.

'It will relieve you from some embarrassment

during the few days you remain here. Mr. Fayre agrees with me that it is best.'

'Where are you going? Have you friends?'

'I am going to my grandmamma's house at Ilvercombe, Mrs. Dangerfield.'

'You do not mean——'

'I beg your pardon,' remarked Agnes, quietly, 'to the house of my father's mother, I should have said.'

'You are welcome there?' the widow asked, in her surprise.

'Yes, she will be very glad to see me.'

'Does she visit you?'

'I have seen her once or twice.'

Aggie turned, and looked long and steadily at Estelle, and then went swiftly towards the door again.

'God bless her,' she murmured; 'I do not suppose she and I will ever meet again, Mrs. Dangerfield; take care of her,' she added, 'for she is not strong, and has no knowledge of the world.'

It was a strange remark at parting, and the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield brooded upon it

afterwards. At present she had only Agnes Challis to consider. She followed her to the landing-place without, a woman's generous instinct, a mother's gratitude impelling her.

'Miss Challis, I fear I have not thanked you sufficiently for your noble rescue of my child.'

'Of my half-sister whom I could not stand and see drown.'

Agnes Challis insisted upon the relationship still, even at the cost of the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield's heightened colour and grave displeasure.

'And I thank you again,' added Frances Dangerfield, after drawing a quick breath, 'most heartily and most gratefully. And if at any time you may be in need of——'

'Good-day, madam, good-day,' and, before the widow could finish her promise of future support, Agnes Challis had flitted down the stairs.

'She is very wild and abrupt,' muttered the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, 'I don't think I could ever like her.'

CHAPTER X.

ACROSS THE FIELDS.

It was four miles and a quarter across the fields to old Mrs. Dangerfield's house—a short cut that saved time, and two and three quarter miles to anyone in a hurry to see the lady—but then, no one was in a particular hurry about that. Agnes Challis set forth on her expedition with a will; she walked briskly from the village, tripped with graceful alacrity over the first stile, and went on across the frosty fields—a woman with a mission that took her at a rapid rate from home. She had made up her mind, and on her fresh young face was the reflex of her purpose to anyone with leisure to observe it. It was not marked by a determinate expression,

for all that—scarcely indicative even of that firmness of character which she possessed in a greater degree than she was herself aware; there was a sadness, as well as a depth of thought, in her looks that told of a sorrow for the necessity which separated her from her new friends at the vicarage. After all, life was not clear to Aggie Challis; there were cross-roads and sharp turnings a-head, and she knew that presently she must come to them, and stop bewildered, looking round for the guide, friend, and counsellor, who might never steal to her side, to say, 'That is the way—follow on, with faith in yourself and your God.'

Her road in life was not as clear to her as was the path across the fields to her grandmother's house, and she could not pursue it confidently. Life had become perplexity; she was on the higher ground already, with the keen air blowing upon her, and the mists rising from the valley, and hiding the peace and rest which she had found of late, but in the endurance of which she had never believed. She was a girl who had met affliction early, and

borne it well, and was prepared for more. If she were in doubt concerning the future, she was not fearful of her courage failing her in it. Under all circumstances—good or bad, right or wrong—Aggie Challis would be brave to the last, she believed.

A mile and a half from the vicarage, her free, swift footsteps were arrested for the first time, and the tall, graceful girl stood, with clasped hands, on the margin of a frozen lake. Here had occurred the accident of yesterday—here had begun the new life of Agnes Challis—and from Estelle Dangerfield's dilemma were already radiating strange lines of adventure and romance. She was not thinking of this herself, for hard, grim facts were at that moment oppressing her. Time and place, and the sharp north wind, which had brought the colour to her cheeks, were forgotten in her reverie, and it was only a man's voice, clear and deep, which aroused her from it.

'Good morning, Miss Challis!'

Agnes turned round quickly, and confronted Hamilton Redclove. Five years and more had

passed since their meeting under the big roof of the North-Western Railway Station at Liverpool, but she recognised him immediately. He had not altered in any way—between the ages of two-and-twenty and seven-and-twenty time is merciful to man, and there was only a graver look upon his face. Perhaps he, too, was not regarding life lightly then, and was uncertain how to act. His dark eyes were fixed steadfastly and scrutinisingly upon her; and that searching gaze, half curious, half perplexed—never wholly distrustful—helped still further to associate him with the day of her liberation from prison, and of his kindness to her brother.

She was not embarrassed at his appearance on the scene, although she was wholly unprepared for him. With the old ease of manner, the pleasant frankness which had charmed him against his will when they had met last, she turned to him at once.

'Good morning. I did not think to meet you down in Warwickshire,' she said.

'But, though you did not see me last night, Miss Challis, you were aware that I came to the

vicarage with my cousin, Mrs. Dangerfield?' said Hamilton, in reply, as he took the hand extended to him, as to an old friend whom she was glad to meet.

'Are you Mr. Hamilton Redclove, then?' she asked, with some surprise.

'At your service,' he answered, relinquishing her hand, and raising his hat with ceremonious politeness.

'You were very careful not to tell me your name when we met in Liverpool,' she said, 'being a mysterious as well as a generous stranger. You are the Mr. Redclove, then, of whom I have heard Miss Dangerfield speak so often.'

There was the faintest suspicion of a smile flickering on the arched upper lip, and Hamilton guessed readily what was in her thoughts, and was for an instant disposed to feel aggrieved at her fancy.

'Ah, poor Estelle!' he said, however, 'you will allow me to thank you for that courage and presence of mind which saved her yesterday.'

'I have been already thanked too much,' answered Aggie; 'it was impulse, not courage.'

'Are you an impulsive girl?'

'I did not think so until a few hours ago,' was the reply; 'I have been disposed to consider myself cool, and deliberate, and methodical—one not easily roused.'

'Or easily subdued,' added Hamilton.

Aggie Challis regarded him attentively before she answered, lightly enough,

'No, nor easily subdued, should the time to fight my own battles ever arrive.'

She walked away from the lake, and Hamilton kept step by her side.

'I am going your way, if you will allow me to accompany you,' he said, by way of explanation to her second look of inquiry.

'Do you know which way I am going?'

'Mr. Fayre told me you thought of spending a few days at Ilvercombe.'

'Yes.'

They were both silent for a while, both on guard possibly, both distrustful, in all probability. Many thoughts were besetting the mind

of man and woman now that they were side by side again, with less mystery between them—with the man's name acknowledged and fresh facts known. Aggie Challis was the first to speak, with her bright, steady eyes directed to the swarthy face of her companion, as though she had suddenly found it worth the study.

'I don't want—I don't care—to talk too much of the past,' she said, suddenly, 'but your presence suggests one or two questions which I should be glad to ask, with your permission.'

'I will reply to them with pleasure—if possible,' he added.

'Ah! you speak with a reserve, as I thought you would,' she answered.

Hamilton did not reply to this charge; he waited patiently for the questions with which she had threatened him. He was bewildered again—as easily and as readily as he had been at Liverpool, when he was disposed to trust her at first sight against the crowd of adverse circumstances from which she had emerged. And now, predisposed to think ill of her, as he had been of late days, it was still impossible to face

those lustrous eyes and believe in her duplicity.

He was on his guard against her when he rose early that morning, and crossed the fields in search of her; but with her at his side, and with her crisp sweet voice ringing in his ears, he was already defenceless. His distrust of the world, of men and women, born of a harsh experience unworthy of his better nature, was at fault here —and it was very strange, unless the simple solution to the riddle lay in the fact that he had misjudged Agnes Challis. Even to himself he did not care to own that he was so poor a judge of character—the knowledge of his species was the one thing of which he was vain. Yesterday he could have told himself complacently that his deep insight into the workings of the human heart had assured him that Agnes Challis was as designing and dangerous as her mother, that she was a clever actress, who was playing a new part in Warwickshire, and whose duplicity it was necessary to foil. To-day—and with her in the flesh before him—it was a different matter. She had grown into a heroine, and saved

Estelle's life, within the last four and twenty hours, and Mr. Fayre had sung to her praise and glory, in his quiet, hard way, and still he had doubted her, until they were in the fields together that sharp winter morning.

It was odd that he could not doubt her after that. She must be 'awfully deep,' he thought, bitterly, as he tried to think the worst of her, in spite of himself.

'I need hardly ask,' she said, 'if you are aware of the position in which I stand as regards the Dangerfields—that was known to you, in all its details, five years since?'

'Yes,' he answered, 'I knew all.'

'Known to you as to the others, in a superficial way,' she added, 'but not my poor mother's story as I, her child, could tell it if I had the inclination, but knowing it in your own fashion. Mr. Redclove,' she added, almost contemptuously, 'I thought you came to Liverpool to help me and my brother?'

'Yes,' he said again.

'At whose suggestion?'

'Well, I must confess now that it was origin-

ally suggested to my uncle by one Daniel Overdown, of Birmingham.'

'Yes, yes, that always faithful friend of mine,' she cried, with enthusiasm, 'but at whose suggestion afterwards did you come to Liverpool to give my brother money—to offer me help, if help were necessary?'

'It is hardly worth making a secret of,' he said, slowly and reluctantly; 'but it is worth relating? The story was ended five years ago, Miss Challis.'

'Such stories never end completely, and this one is remembered in the grateful heart of one woman,' she murmured.

'You had nothing to be grateful for,' he said.

'Yes, I had.'

'The whole mission was a failure.'

'Heaven knows it was not,' she cried.

'But your brother——'

'Oh, I was not thinking of him, Mr. Redclove,' she said, sorrowfully, 'although your mission there may have worked well, or better than we believe at present. For poor Sam was never bad—never wholly inconsiderate. I have letters

from him, which he wrote to me when I was in prison, that bring the tears in my eyes to look at still.'

'Indeed!'

'But who sent you to Liverpool?' asked Aggie again; 'was it the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, Estelle's mother?'

'No,' he replied, 'it was not she.'

'Not Estelle's mother? I am very sorry for that,' she said, and the shadow of her disappointment settled on her face. 'Who could it have been? Surely,' with a quick glance at him, 'it was not your own impulse?'

'Oh! no,' he said, with a laugh, 'I had outlived all chivalrous impulses long before that.'

Did the shadow deepen still more on her face at his scoffing answer?—he could almost imagine that it did.

'It was my father's mother, then; the old lady whom I am going to visit?' she said.

'Old Mrs. Dangerfield's mind gave way at the first news of her son's death,' said Hamilton.

'Yes, yes; then, why don't you tell me who it was?' she added, with a little frown at him for his tardiness of explanation.

'It was my uncle who suggested I should go down to Liverpool and do what I could for you and your brother,' said Hamilton, smiling at this exhibition of her petulance.

'That man!' she cried; 'is it possible that he, in his selfishness, has ever thought of us!'

It was Hamilton's turn to be surprised, he who had always affected coolness of deportment to an extraordinary extent.

'You speak as if you knew my uncle, Miss Challis?' he said.

'I have not the honour of his lordship's acquaintance,' she answered, 'but—I have heard of him very frequently.'

She compressed her lips and looked firmly ahead of her. Hamilton was not satisfied with her reply.

'Is that as frank an answer to a question as I have given you?' he said.

'What I have heard of your uncle, Mr. Redclove, redounds so little to his credit that his

nephew would not care to listen to the particulars.'

'They may be false.'

'Hardly.'

'You hear of my uncle's thought for you and your brother at a critical period—you believe in that?'

'I am trying to see the motive for it,' she replied, presently; 'I shall work the problem out. You will be Lord Redclove when your uncle dies, sir?'

'I am heir to the title—yes.'

'You will make a better nobleman, I hope,' she said.

'I hope I shall in your estimation,' said Hamilton, laughing; 'for, upon my honour, Miss Challis, you are terribly hard upon the present lord.'

'You are deeply attached to your uncle?'

Hamilton laughed again.

'I am like a cat, not deeply attached to anything. And, if you press me hard with that question, I will even aver that my estimable relative has one or two faults which, if he

could gracefully drop, he would be a better man.'

'One might say that of any man,' said Agnes.

'Or woman,' added Hamilton.

'I have known more than one unselfish woman, too,' said Aggie, thoughtfully; 'but oh! the past—let us get away from it, please,' she cried, with sudden impatience again, 'I don't want to dwell upon it now. The world gets brighter and brighter for me, if not clear yet. I am a young woman who has made many friends and not one enemy. Is that not something to be grateful for?'

'Truly, it is,' answered Hamilton.

'The friends may drop away, and the enemies come again, but I shan't be ungrateful for the peace I have had, and the good feeling I have been lucky enough to secure.'

'I hardly understand,' said Hamilton; 'you are waiting for enemies?'

'Yes, I am.'

The face looked very resolute for an instant as he glanced askance at it.

'What enemies?' he inquired.

'Young Mrs. Dangerfield may be one, and you—may be another,' she replied.

'I hope I can answer for my cousin; I am sure I can respond for myself,' he said.

'Your cousin Frances is a proud woman, who dislikes me instinctively, and naturally; and I—I,' she added, hesitatingly, 'don't think I like *her*. As for you——'

She looked at him gravely, and then the sunlight of one of her bright smiles rippled over her face and changed its expression again. He had been regarding her very gravely and wonderingly, and his stolid aspect had afforded her some amusement, it appeared.

'Well,' he said, amazed in his turn.

'Well,' she echoed, 'I—I shall never be very much afraid of you.'

'No, I am not a very terrible being,' he replied.

'You started in life as a friend to me and Sam.'

'And you will be always grateful to old friends?'

'Yes,' she answered, readily; 'I will.'

'You are an odd girl,' he confessed. 'You are grateful to me, a medium of charity, and not to him who conferred it.'

'It *was* Lord Redclove's money, then?'

Hamilton paused a moment, and then said,

'I assure you, Miss Challis, that his lordship desired me to spend his money as freely upon you both as I thought necessary. And now,' he said, quickly, 'as we have got back to the past again, despite ourselves, let me ask you a question in my turn.'

There was a strange, scared look at him before she said,

'I will answer, if I can. Of course there are some questions to which it would be very painful to reply, and you may guess what they are, and spare me.'

'I am afraid my curiosity must be painful to you, Miss Challis,' he said, with a new earnestness; 'but, let me confess, you have puzzled me for years, although I have tried hard to understand you.'

'And failed?'

'And failed,' he repeated.

'I did not think there was much mystery about me, although my life has been out of the common track. But what do you wish to know?' she asked, very impulsively again.

'I should like to hear from your own lips the story of that life.'

'It is too long, and too humiliating.'

'Let me confess that I have tried to read part of it from the pages of an old newspaper.'

'Ha!' she exclaimed, 'so curious as that.'

'Not from idle curiosity,' he hastened to add, 'but from interest in you as the daughter of a dead friend, as one in whom Mr. Fayre believed, when I was disposed to doubt—when it was natural I should doubt.'

'As you doubted me yesterday?'

'Before we met—yes,' said Hamilton, confidently.

'As you doubt me now?' she said.

'No, upon my soul I don't,' he cried, very emphatically, but very inelegantly; 'I can't tell how it is, but I don't. I feel quite sure there is something which you can explain to me.'

'But which there is no necessity to explain,' she answered.

'I hope there is,' he cried.

'Why?' she asked, curiously.

'So that I may be able to answer those who judge you unfairly.'

'Lord Redclove?'

'He never alludes to you.'

'Never thinks of me?'

'Never.'

'He was interested in me once—he was at my trial at the assizes.'

'Lord Redclove!—my uncle!—at your trial?'

'Yes.'

There was a long pause, and they went half across the next field, Hamilton assisting her over the next stile in solemn silence.

CHAPTER XI.

ALMOST FRIENDS.

Hamilton was more than amazed—he was overpowered by this statement of Agnes Challis. He walked on, like a man endeavouring to sift out all the dream-like unrealities by which he seemed beset. His memory went back some five years ago, when he was constituted Lord Redclove's ambassador, and his lordship appeared to know but little of these Challises, and to care less for them, despite his charity. What did it mean?—and why had his uncle put himself so much out of the way to deceive him, and Estelle Dangerfield, and others—even the man Overdown—who had brought to him news of which he was already aware?

'Miss Challis,' he said, at last, 'you have surprised me.'

'Lord Redclove might have told you long since how I bore myself at my trial for felony—for being found in a house at Chester in unlawful possession of goods that did not belong to me—but you would have thought no better of me for his history of the case. We will say he was as curious as his nephew about my life, shall we?'

'Don't ask me yet,' he entreated; 'give me time, please—and pray continue.'

'I have nothing further to relate,' said Agnes; 'but I will, out of gratitude, and to be thought the best of by those who have been kind to me, say this—that I had a right to be in that house, and that I was innocent of the crime for which I was sentenced. Mr. Fayre knew this—Daniel Overdown knows it—and to you I tell it now, sir, and ask you to believe me.'

'Miss Challis, I believe you,' he cried.

'I offered no explanation to my judge—I do not to you—it is impossible. But if you will take my word, why, then I shall never think of

you again as one of my enemies approaching.'

'Never your enemy!' Hamilton murmured.

'If I had been guilty, I should not look back lightly at my prison life, and see in it only God's will that I should suffer. There is no shame in it to me—it was a martyrdom, not a punishment.'

Her face flushed with excitement. Hamilton had never seen her look so beautiful, and his heart thrilled strangely as he gazed at her. The man who had prided himself on his scepticism, his stoicism, his hardness of belief in anything above the common run of sordidness and self-interest was completely moved by Aggie Challis's demeanour. Here was a woman who had suffered—and had suffered for others—here, in the lower stratum of society, was unselfishness personified, the first woman who, in his estimation, had been ever worth a second thought.

She was the first to recover her equanimity. That enviable art of self-repression—rarer in woman than in man—was singularly at her command; but then, it had been the study of her life. Hamilton could scarcely imagine, five

minutes afterwards, that the lady by whose side he walked had been eloquent and impassioned over the past, which had done her injustice; she was so easy, and natural, and calm.

'I should not be surprised at the doctor's giving permission for Estelle to get up to-day —she has slept well during the night,' Aggie said.'

'Very likely.'

'Her mamma and you will be glad to get out of this cold, bleak Warwickshire country,' Aggie went on, 'and there is no probability of Estelle's stay being continued at the vicarage?'

'No—I think not,' was the absent answer.

'I should have been glad to bid Estelle good-bye,' Aggie said; 'will you let her know, Mr. Redclove, that that was my wish, at least?'

'Certainly,' was the reply.

'I mean,' was the further explanation proffered, 'to let her know when she is back in town —not now.'

'She will come to say good-bye to you before she goes—of course,' said Hamilton, decisively.

'I have made my adieux to Estelle through her mamma,' said Aggie Challis, 'and she and I are not likely to meet again. It is as well,' she added; 'it saves trouble and excitement, although Estelle is not impulsive.'

'Not very impulsive, certainly,' asserted Hamilton, drily.

'She has one of the best hearts in the world, too, and I am sure she will not forget me, Mr. Redclove.'

'Why should she?'

'Her mamma will tell her presently it is not worth while—that it is hardly judicious—to take any further notice of the young woman at the vicarage; and it will save embarrassment and explanation if you will use your influence with her also to this effect. And,' she added, after a few moments' pause, 'years hence, when you two are married, I should like you to disclose the story of her relationship to me—it will do her no harm?'

'Miss Challis, there is one delusion under which you are labouring,' said Hamilton, very quickly.

'What is that?'

'I am not going to marry my cousin Estelle,' he continued; 'she and I are not engaged to each other—have never been attached to each other.'

'Indeed!' said Agnes, thoughtfully, even sorrowfully.

'I hope no one has said or intimated that we are?' he asked, with a sudden assumption of dignity.

'No one,' answered Agnes; 'it was your coming yesterday with Mrs. Dangerfield that gave me the idea, I suppose. Excuse my mentioning it; I have been very rude.'

'No—not at all—but——'

And then Hamilton, like a wise man, dropped the subject, and very adroitly drifted in another direction.

'But here we are at Ilvercombe,' he said, 'for that old red-brick mansion in the distance marks the end of our journey.'

'Yes, there is the end of it,' she answered, in so strange a voice that he looked hard into her face to read some meaning

therefrom which it was not in his power to interpret.

'It is a gloomy place for one old lady,' Hamilton remarked—'a very sad and very lonely place to inhabit.'

'Yes, it is,' assented Aggie.

'I can remember coming down here, as a boy, to see Mr. Dangerfield.'

'My father—yes,' said his companion, with surprising coolness, as he paused.

'And being terribly nervous of the gloomy corridors and passages, wherein I was eternally losing myself,' he continued; 'it must be an uncomfortable home for its present possessor.'

'There are associations that endear the place to her—but, yes, she is very lonely,' added Aggie Challis.

The last stile was reached, and Hamilton sprang over it, and assisted his companion to trip lightly after him.

'I will bid you good morning, Miss Challis,' he said, with grave formality.

'You are not coming to see old Mrs. Dangerfield?'

'Please excuse me. Not now.'

'I thought you said you were going to Ilvercombe Park, when we first met,' she remarked.

'So I was,' he answered, coolly, 'but I have altered my mind.'

'During the journey?'

'Yes.'

'So changeable as that?' she said, lightly, and almost laughingly.

He smiled beneath the influence of her lighter mood, and then became suddenly graver than before.

'Yes, so changeable!' he echoed; 'pray present my compliments to Mrs. Dangerfield.'

'I will—if you have not the inclination to present them for yourself,' she replied.

'Not now,' he answered; 'not for worlds.'

He shook hands with her, raised his hat, and leaped over the stile into the frosty fields again, over which he strode at a tremendous pace, after one hasty glance behind him at the tall, fair girl, who had been his companion from Gray-

ling, and who was proceeding thoughtfully to her new home, with all the smiles quenched from her.

CHAPTER XII.

A PORTRAIT.

Agnes Challis had certainly grave reasons for reflection after parting with Hamilton Redclove. If on her side she had puzzled her companion, the behaviour of the lord's nephew had seemed none the less variable and eccentric to her. At the last moment he had suddenly bidden her good morning, told her he had changed his mind as to his intention of calling at Ilvercombe, and almost ran away from her. Had he ever intended to visit the old lady on that occasion; had it all been an excuse to force himself upon her society, and learn more from her than under other circumstances he might have been able to

do? Had he set himself the task of studying her, of worming from her, if possible, the secrets of her life, in order to arrive at a truer estimate of a character which he had confessed that morning had perplexed him? And yet, if so, why had he given up the opportunity of accompanying her to old Mrs. Dangerfield's house, and returned to the vicarage, where he would only hear a highly-coloured story of her virtues from the lips of those who thought too much of her already.

However, did it matter what the nephew of Lord Redclove thought of her?—he was passing swiftly from her sphere again, just as he had vanished away in Liverpool, and there were as grateful recollections left behind with this second flitting as with the first, when he had offered to take care of Sam. On this occasion he had owned his faith in her, and a few secret words of hers had shattered years of his distrust. Well, it was satisfactory to live down suspicion, and be judged more fairly by her little world. It did not even matter why, at the last, he had altered his intention of seeing her grandmother;

but it was very remarkable, she thought again.

She was still thinking of it, as she proceeded onwards with her head bent low. It was for this reason that she was unaware that her sudden appearance on the scene had already created no small stir and bustle at the big house at Ilvercombe, where her grandmother was. The old lady had risen early that day, and was standing at the window of her drawing-room, looking out upon the wintry landscape, when the graceful figure of Agnes Challis was seen approaching the house. Was it possible? Could this be anything more than a dream from which she had not yet awakened?—had she ever thought that Agnes Challis, 'Paul's girl' as much as Estelle was surely, would thus quietly and gravely approach her? What did this arrival portend? Something new and strange after all, something which might break her down completely, humble her to the dust, or arouse her to a sense of danger, perhaps defiance, who could tell even that? Or something that would bring her that solace and peace of mind which had not come yet to her declining

years, though she had struggled for it, prayed for it? When she was unhappy, Agnes Challis had said, she would come and tell her of her reason, and here she was! The girl had walked a long distance by the footpath between Grayling and Ilvercombe, had risen early and come on in haste. With what news? Heaven have mercy on her, thought old Mrs. Dangerfield, with what news was Agnes Challis approaching her father's house?

She tottered to the bell, which she rang very loudly.

'My cloak—my stick,' she cried to the servant who entered somewhat hastily, as if alarmed by his mistress's energetic summons, 'tell some of them to bring down my things at once.'

'Yes, madam. But——'

'I am in haste. I am going out. Don't you understand me, you poor sleepy dolt,' she exclaimed, angrily.

'Very good, madam. Certainly.' And away scuttled the lacquey, and presently Mrs. Dangerfield's maid entered, bearing the articles for which she had inquired.

When she was ready for the journey, she opened the French windows of the room, and let in a rush of cold air into the place.

'Shall I accompany you, madam?' asked the maid.

'No, I don't want you. I don't want anybody?'

Thus it was that before Agnes Challis had reached the red-brick mansion, shadowed in by the great trees, old Mrs. Dangerfield, weighed down heavily by furs, advanced along the avenue towards her.

'What is it, child? What has happened to bring you here so early?' she exclaimed.

'Nothing of any grave importance, madam,' answered Aggie, 'although I bring à little news to you.'

'Bad news?' was the quick inquiry.

'Not bad news. Estelle's mamma came last night to Mr. Fayre's to fetch her daughter home, but something, which I will tell you soon, keeps Estelle a prisoner at the vicarage for a few days. Until she goes to London, I am in the way at Mr. Fayre's.'

'Ah! yes—probably,' assented the old lady. 'And so——'

'And so I have come to ask you to take care of me for a few days,' Aggie concluded.

'Willingly,' said the old lady, as she turned and put her arm through Aggie Challis's for support; 'willingly, as you know.'

'I am welcome then, Mrs. Dangerfield?' said Aggie.

'Yes, you are very welcome,' said the old lady. 'I am glad you have come to me in all good faith.'

Hence it may be seen, at this stage of our narrative, that old Mrs. Dangerfield and Agnes Challis had become greater friends than when we saw them last in the garden of Mr. Fayre. They had met of late days, and approached more closely to each other's hearts. They had met at the vicarage, and once at the church, but this was Agnes Challis's first visit to the grand house where her father had been born. She had shunned that until to-day, and observing her approach from the window of the drawing-room, had naturally alarmed an old

lady whose nerves were far from strong. Her hand was trembling, as it rested on the arm of her companion. Agnes felt it shake as they went slowly, the strong and the weak, up the terrace steps into the house, and into the deep, sombre hall, with oil-paintings and armour ranged upon its walls and in its deep recesses.

'I have excited you by coming without a warning,' Aggie said.

'All things come without warning to me,' answered the old lady; 'but you are welcome, Agnes. Let me say that once more.'

'I thought I should be, or——'

'Or you would not have attempted to lighten the loneliness of my life,' was the half reproach conveyed here.

'It is to escape many questions, to spare your daughter-in-law's pride that I come, Mrs. Dangerfield. For nothing higher or more laudable than that.'

'Still you are welcome, child. I am not used to you,' she added, with a strange, wistful expression on her seamed face; 'it is like a dream to see you in this house, but—I rejoice it has come to pass.'

'Courage, madam—courage.'

'Why should I want that?' asked the old woman, quickly.

'I cannot tell; but you seem very weak to-day.'

'I am always weak—I am close on seventy; it's a great age for my family,' she said, almost apologetically.

They passed into a spacious room together—a pleasant dining-room, looking over a wide range of park-land. There were more oil-paintings on the wall; one, as bright and fresh as though it had been painted yesterday, was particularly remarkable. It was the portrait of Paul Erasmus Wilberforce Dangerfield at the age of one-and-twenty, a clean-faced, somewhat stern-looking young man, with a vast amount of will expressed in the broad forehead and decisive jaw.

Aggie looked at the portrait as she entered the room, and the old woman's eyes followed hers instinctively.

'Do you know that face?' she asked, in a low tone.

'Yes, very well indeed,' answered Aggie, with a sigh.

'Whose is it?'

'My father's.'

'Why should you know?'

'I have a miniature at home like it; it was painted for my mother,' was the calm reply.

'I should be glad to see it some day,' said the old lady. 'You have never spoken of this before to me?'

'There are many things of which I never speak,' replied Aggie; 'all belonging to the past—wherein he looked like that'—pointing to the portrait—'is a matter of deep perplexity to me.'

'Perplexity!' repeated Mrs. Dangerfield.

'Yes, I think so.'

'Oh! don't think so, Agnes,' was the earnest adjuration here; 'it will age you before your time to brood on this. There is no object in it, and no solace.'

Agnes glanced up at the portrait again.

'I am not quite sure of that,' she said.

CHAPTER XIII.

PLAIN-SPEAKING.

Estelle Dangerfield did not recover from the effect of the accident on the ice so quickly as had been prophesied by her friends. A fragile girl, whom anything out of the common way disturbed, she was too low and feverish all the day of Agnes Challis's departure for the doctor to give her permission to move. Hence the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield kept to her daughter's room, maintained a rigid watch, and was jealous of all intruders on her privacy. The following day Estelle was better, or declared she was better. That small will of her own with which she was possessed, gathered strength to itself, and resisted advice

petulantly. She was not going to remain in bed any longer—she preferred not to be stifled to death in that little room. She thought that she would be glad to get downstairs, and see Mr. Fayre, and Bella, and—Hamilton. Aggie Challis, she knew, had gone away to make room for her mother, but she ventured to express a hope that Aggie would be sent for. It would be easy for Grandmamma Dangerfield to bring her over in her carriage. It was strange that neither Agnes nor her grandmother had come or sent throughout that day, did not her mamma think so? Then mamma, always truthful, if rigid, had to confess that messengers had arrived with inquiries from the grandmamma and Miss Challis, and had received the glad tidings that Miss Dangerfield was improving rapidly in health.

'And nothing was said about Aggie's coming to see me to-day?' cried Estelle.

'Nothing was said about Miss Challis's coming to see you.'

'That is a little strange,' said Estelle, musingly.

'You forget Miss Challis has just left the vicarage on a visit to your grandmamma.'

'I haven't forgotten that she saved my life,' was the reply.

'You would be ungrateful to forget it,' answered the mother.

'She is a very odd girl, but I can't understand why she keeps away from me like this,' was the half-fretful comment.

'It was only yesterday she went away,' remarked the mother again.

'Yes—that's all very well, mamma; but you do not appear to comprehend that I have become attached to Agnes Challis. When we get to London, I will ask you to——'

'Presently, Estelle, when you are stronger, we will talk of this,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, interrupting her; 'you are getting almost excited, and I want to see you as calm and ladylike as ever.'

'Ah, yes!' said Estelle, wearily, 'the calmness will all come back in town.'

'Excitement just now is very bad for you, the doctor says.'

'I am not excited, but I am terribly tired of this room.'

Or of the mother's company—which was it? the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield thought, regretfully.

These Fayres had not done her daughter any good; she knew that they would not when she let her go, unwillingly, into Warwickshire. Estelle was restless and almost impatient, and the mother saw she had not sent her out of harm's way—which was out of love's way—with success. The Fayres had conspired against her, thought Frances—at least, the minister had, in keeping back the secret of Agnes Challis's presence in the house—and now she had brought Hamilton himself into the country after her girl.

They went downstairs into Mr. Fayre's old-fashioned drawing-room, where Estelle was welcomed warmly by its occupants, and where Hamilton saw her again, the first time for many months. He was studiously blind to her blushing cheeks and trembling hand, and was soon chatting with her as pleasantly and easily as ever—as if he had never stopped away all that

long weary time, which her heart had reckoned by hours and minutes very sadly, as if he had no knowledge in his own heart how much he had been missed! Very awkward and very painful, ay, and very pitiful to witness, this one-sided love which lops over clumsily, and puts the soul out of gear. It is generally too big to disguise, and Estelle Dangerfield made no effort to conceal her pleasure at the sight of him. She forgot Aggie Challis's seeming indifference to her state of health even—and possibly it was on the strength of her daughter's affection for Hamilton that the astute mother had calculated when she had expressed a wish to be escorted to Grayling by her cousin.

Mr. Fayre and his daughter hardly 'got on,' as the phrase goes, with the widow. Frances Dangerfield was studiously polite, but studiously grave and cool; a lady who gave herself airs of superiority, Bella thought, a little indignantly, because she was Lord Redclove's daughter, Bella Fayre not being behind the scenes with Aggie Challis, her father, and the reader of this book. She did not know that the Honourable

Mrs. Dangerfield was a woman with a grievance, but the minister did; and he said, somewhat suddenly, after lunch,

'You are looking pale with your nursing, Mrs. Dangerfield; may I suggest a stroll through our village?'

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield hesitated; but on the angular features of her host was an expression not difficult to read.

'Thank you,' she said, 'the fresh air will do me good, perhaps.'

Mr. Fayre and the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield went together into the country lanes and towards the village and the church. If there were to be war between them, they were not long in drawing swords and slashing at each other. They were both folk with a soul above evasion, and they had not got out of sight of the vicarage before Mr. Fayre began.

'You will be glad when your daughter Estelle is strong enough to leave us, Mrs. Dangerfield?'

'Yes, I shall be very glad,' was the quick assent.

'She has improved since her stay here. She

came to Grayling a dull, sickly young woman, with little interest in life; thanks to Bella and Agnes Challis, she is a brighter being altogether now.'

'She was not well when she left London. Doubtless the fresh air did her good, until the accident occurred.'

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield would not allow that Bella Fayre or Agnes Challis had had a share in her daughter's better estate. Mr. Fayre did not wish to argue the point, but he went on unflinchingly.

'She has evinced a strong affection for Agnes Challis.'

'You should have checked it, Mr. Fayre,' was the severe comment expressed, 'or have let me know that that young woman was a resident in your house. It was not right to keep me in the dark concerning her so long.'

'I could not see any possibility of harm, and there was a strong probability of good arising from their acquaintance,' he replied.

'I should have been allowed to judge for myself,' said the aggrieved mother.

'But you could not judge, not knowing anything,' he answered, very thoughtfully.

'What do you mean?'

'Not knowing Agnes Challis,' he continued, 'or Agnes Challis's story, or the motive which a good and thoughtful girl might have in wishing to meet your daughter face to face.'

'It was her wish—it was her plot, then?' exclaimed Frances Dangerfield.

'There was no plot in it,' replied the minister. 'My daughter and yours had been schoolfellows, and this visit had been arranged between *them*. When Agnes considered the matter closely—and it was a complicated problem for her to solve, and for no one else—she thought it would be wise to let her come to Grayling, and go away again, in ignorance of the truth. No harm could accrue, and good might follow in due time.'

'I can only see the harm to follow. There is always a risk of a word betraying all.'

'All what?' asked the minister, quietly.

'I will not speak of a past that has shadowed my whole life,' she cried, warmly; 'you know!'

'I know you are a proud woman, Mrs. Dangerfield,' said Mr. Fayre.

'An injured woman,' she corrected.

'Yes, deeply injured; but the man is in his grave,' he added, thoughtfully, 'and cannot rise up to solve a mystery.'

'What mystery?'

'Ask our Aggie presently.'

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield drew herself up another inch or two.

'I have nothing to ask Miss Challis concerning my husband's past; there is nothing that I would go five steps aside to learn. God is my witness,' she added, petulantly, 'that I learned enough in the few weeks before he died to last my time out.'

'You are a more excitable woman than I have been led to expect,' said Mr. Fayre, gravely regarding her.

'You touch a wound, and are surprised that I shrink,' she answered.

'I had understood from your daughter that you were religious, a lady not easily impressed by this world, its trials, and its little vanities. I am certainly surprised.'

'My excitement surprises myself,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield; 'but I have met events out of the common way here, have been deceived, and—and you do not even ask my pardon,' she added, with sudden acerbity.

'There is no necessity for me to ask any human being's pardon,' said Mr. Fayre, proudly, in his turn; 'I was acting in your cause.'

'Impossible.'

'As I shall continue to act,' he added, coolly; 'though I am very much disappointed in you, madam, though your pride is objectionable, your unforgiving nature repellent, and your religion a sham.'

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield was thoroughly confounded by this angular being's plain speaking—this summing-up of her character as no one in life had dared to estimate it hitherto. In town she had been greatly respected; ministers had sought her advice, complimented her on her liberality, and good taste, and clear judgment; and here was a poor country vicar, whom she had only seen two

days, taking her to task and railing at her as at a school-girl.

'You—you have no right to talk to me like this,' she said, in a voice which trembled in spite of her.

'I think I have, madam,' he said, more gently; 'for I see a high character warped by prosperity, and taking affliction as an insult from heaven rather than a trial. You have been deeply afflicted, I grant; life has been a bitter disappointment, but religion cannot have been much of a solace to you, if the result is this,' he added, touching her arm lightly for an instant.

'What should religion teach me?' she asked, in a low tone.

'Charity.'

'Is it want of charity that would save a father's honour from being suspected?' she retorted; 'that would keep Estelle apart from Agnes Challis, for the sake of both young women; that would let a miserable story die out, rather than live on to shame me with the rest of them?'

'You are getting excited again,' said Mr.

Fayre; 'it is very remarkable that everybody has told me what a phlegmatic lady you are. Pray compose yourself.'

'I am composed,' she said, with dignity. 'You will not see me disturbed again. But you have not answered my question.'

'I will answer it my own way, if you will allow me,' he said; 'the story cannot die out—there is no keeping it back, with events marching forward, and old Mrs. Dangerfield taking an interest in Miss Challis, and Miss Challis alive and watchful, and, in her own way, as proud as you are.'

'Proud!'

'Therefore,' he continued, unheeding her exclamation of surprise, 'there is a want of charity in holding at arm's length the girl who has saved your daughter's life—in letting her see how ungrateful you are, and how unforgiving for the wrong in which she took no part.'

'I am not ungrateful,' murmured Mrs. Dangerfield, 'but I cannot make Agnes Challis my friend.'

'I am sorry.'

'Or my daughter's friend. It is beyond my power.'

'I am sorry,' the minister said again.

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield glanced at him curiously, but he did not continue the subject; he had expressed his opinion, and was silent until they reached the village, when he said,

'If you were to enter any of those cottages, you would find their inmates had constituted Agnes Challis almost a saint in their minds. But she is not saint-like,' he added, drily; 'she is very human.'

'It is God's mercy that the child of a bad woman should turn to the light like this!'

'I did not know the mother,' he answered, slowly; 'she was weak, and wilful, and eccentric, Aggie confesses—but, please, do not call her bad to her own child.'

'Miss Challis and I are not likely to meet again.'

'I hope you will call upon her, at her grandmother's, before you leave Warwickshire?'

'No, sir.'

'It is your duty.'

'I scarcely require Mr. Fayre to tell me what my duty is,' she said, in very cutting accents now.

'I think you do,' was the reply, as he surveyed her grimly, 'for you are lamentably deficient in that duty to your neighbour whom you are directed to love as yourself. Your religious education has been neglected—your troubles are first, and your God stands second. Why, a woman like you,' he said, almost contemptuously, 'despite her self-conceit, may give up in despair at any moment of her miserable existence.'

'I am not miserable,' she cried, indignantly.

'I am sure you are not happy, poor woman!' said Mr. Fayre.

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield shrank from further converse with this singular being, stalking on by her side, and reproving her for her sins of omission, this man, who would not remember she was a lady—a lady born!—and who saw only faults, and pride, and mental misery in her whom most people envied, and whom he

only seemed to pity, and almost despise. Yes, it was as well that she left Warwickshire, and went back to her own sphere—her own particular religion, whose priests did her more justice than he did.

'I will go to my room—I am not well,' she said, wearily, when she was back at the vicarage.

'Shall I send Bella, or your daughter, to you?'

'No; leave me to myself for a while, please.'

'To your better self,' he added, meaningly.

She turned from him petulantly—she was tired of his preaching, and of him, she thought. But in her own room, with the door locked against intruders, she gave way a little, and all that she had said seemed to gather strength to dismay her.

'This is a terrible man—why did I come to Warwickshire?' murmured the rebellious spirit, still strong in the fair bosom of Lord Redclove's daughter.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE NEWS-BEARER.

LIFE with the old lady of Ilvercombe was somewhat of a dull existence to Agnes Challis, who was fond of life, and enjoyed life, in her quiet way. The gloomy grandeur of the place contrasted unfavourably with the vicarage, and the high spirits of Bella Fayre were terribly missed. Agnes showed no signs of dissatisfaction with the change; on the contrary, she became an agreeable companion to the grandmother, and kept her thoughtful looks towards home to the time when she was alone in her room, or on the terrace of the garden.

The day following the dialogue in our last chapter was Sunday, and old Mrs. Dangerfield,

at the breakfast-table, told Agnes that she had ordered the carriage to take her young companion to Grayling Church.

'You will be glad to see your friends,' said the old lady, 'and to hear when the Dangerfields leave the vicarage.'

Agnes looked thoughtfully at the speaker.

'Are you going?' she inquired.

'No,' was the reply; 'I never go to church—you know I don't,' she added, a little petulantly.

'I have heard you say so, I remember now,' said Aggie.

'I think too much in church; I can't follow prayer, hymn, or sermon. What is the use of my being there in the body, when the mind—the little that is left of it—is miles and miles away?' she said, more irritably still. 'In church I am unhappy.'

'I am sorry to hear this.'

'Not that I was ever anything but an unhappy, discontented woman,' said the grandmother; 'and, when Paul died, the world was a great blank to me.'

'You were very fond of your son?'

'God knows I was very fond and very proud of him.'

'Was he very fond of you?' asked Aggie.

The old lady set down her cup and saucer, which began to clatter in her hand.

'Who told you he was not?' she asked.

'No one.'

'He liked me well enough; only that accursed pride which he inherited from me and his father did not leave room for much exhibition of affection. But—he was not—a bad son,' she added. very slowly, 'though we never understood each other; though my great love might have made him trust me more.'

'Some day—not now,' said Aggie, quickly, 'you must tell me why he did not.'

'You are curious?' said the old lady, suspiciously.

'About my father—naturally. For he is a greater mystery to me than to you.'

'The shadow of his life falls upon another's very strangely. But, Agnes,' said the old lady, leaning across the table with an earnest look in her deep-set eyes, 'it is not well to be curious

about him. You are happy and contented as you are, and the sacred dead should rest in peace.'

'Still——'

'Please let it,' she said, in a strangely beseeching tone, 'for the sake of an old woman who has seen to your future and provided for it as *he* would have wished, had he lived.'

Agnes started, and the colour mounted to her face. This was the first time it had been intimated to her that Mrs. Dangerfield of Ilvercombe had set her name down in her will, and she took the hint thus conveyed somewhat ungraciously.

'I hope you have not thought of me in that way,' she cried; 'you must not talk to me of a bribe offered for peace's sake. For, grandmamma, I am not at war with you.'

'There, there, child, don't let us go on in this fashion,' said the old lady, speaking very rapidly. 'I want you to know I have a right to think of you—and that I have thought of you a great deal. Let me be now; don't ask me any questions; don't let me ask any questions

of you. You have a story in your heart—I saw it when I first came to the vicarage. It may be true or false, or half-true; but don't trouble about it any more. I am an old woman who would be at rest.'

Agnes bowed to her appeal; the old lady's eagerness was touching. It was a wild, yearning cry for repose—for even Agnes's silence under much wrong and calumny, perhaps—and the fair young woman was not there to disturb the last days of one whom trouble had shattered strangely.

'I will stay at home and read to you this morning,' said Agnes; 'you are not so well as I could wish.'

'Not so calm, perhaps,' she added, half apologetically; 'for we have drifted into a subject which always disturbs me—that might drive me mad again at any moment, and take me back to that awful place I got free from by a miracle. Am I not keeping you from church?'

'I did not intend to go to church this morning.'

'Not to see Miss Fayre—or Estelle?'

'I must keep here till Mrs. Dangerfield and her daughter have returned to London—if you will put up with me,' she added.

'It is your home so long as *you* can put up with me,' said the old lady, with emphasis. 'Shall I countermand the order for the carriage?'

'Yes.'

'And yet your heart is with those girls at Grayling?' said the old lady, a little jealously.

'If they think so, they will come and see me, or send me a kind word,' said Aggie.

'Ah!' said old Mrs. Dangerfield, with a little sigh, 'there is some of the family pride in you, too!'

'Have I anything to be proud of?' asked Aggie, with a faint smile.

'Yes, I think so. For you'—here she stood up and rested her thin hands on the shoulders of her grand-daughter—'are a good girl.'

'I am not certain of that,' said Aggie, with a laugh, 'oh, dear no—I am far from sure.'

The conversation took a lighter turn, thanks to Aggie's adroitness, and presently the two

women were sauntering about the garden together—the elder leaning on the young one's arm. It was a mild day for winter time—the frost had gone yesterday—and the south wind had come stealing for a few fugitive hours into Warwickshire. The sun was bright and it was warm on the terrace, along which the two women walked. It was in this position, and on this terrace, that Hamilton Redclove found them about half-past twelve o'clock that Sunday morning.

It was the old lady who saw him first in the distance, and took him for a trespasser.

'Another of them,' she said, pointing to the park-land and the slight figure advancing beneath the trees; 'these Warwickshire boors look upon my place as common property, and make cross cuts over it in sheer defiance. I shall have to prosecute somebody presently for example's sake.'

Aggie gazed in the direction indicated.

'It looks like Mr. Redclove,' she said.

'Did he say he was coming?'

'No.'

'He brings us news that they have left the vicarage,' was the old lady's suggestion.

'Very likely,' answered Agnes, softly.

The elder woman glanced sharply under her grey brows at Agnes for a while, and then once more turned her attention to the guest advancing towards them.

'Why couldn't he approach the house in a proper fashion,' she muttered; 'he must have scaled the park-fence and jumped the ditches, like a poacher.'

'He is not particularly ceremonious, I fancy.'

'I don't quite know what to make of him,' said old Mrs. Dangerfield, still watching Hamilton; 'he is full of odd conceits and ideas, with a strong touch of his uncle in him.'

'Oh, not like his uncle, I hope!' cried Aggie, quickly.

'Why—what does it matter to you?'

'Nothing,' answered Aggie at once, 'but this is surely a gentleman—honest and brave. You forget he came from London to Liverpool to help two outcasts, and their position did not shock him, but warmed his heart towards them.

I can't believe Lord Redclove sent him,' Aggie added, very positively.

'He said he did?'

'Yes.'

'Well, perhaps he is not to be relied upon for veracity—Lord Redclove was always a terrible liar, Agnes, and perhaps the young man takes after him,' said the old lady, calmly.

Hamilton had seen the ladies, raised his hat, and was coming up the terrace steps towards them. Old Mrs. Dangerfield sat down in a garden-seat that was handy, and Agnes stood by her side with a smile of welcome to the newcomer as he advanced.

'Good morning, Mrs. Dangerfield. Good morning, Miss Challis,' he said, approaching and shaking hands with them, 'I have taken advantage of the fine morning to escape Mr. Fayre's sermon, and pay you a visit, if you will excuse the intrusion.'

'We are glad to see you,' answered the old lady. 'Did you come from Grayling direct?'

'Yes.'

'Then you have been climbing all my walls and fences.'

'That was to save time, Mrs. Dangerfield, and is proof of my impatience to reach you.'

'I am too old to care for compliments, Mr. Redclove,' said the mistress of Ilvercombe, severely, 'and this young lady is too wise, I hope.'

'There is no compliment intended. Time *was* precious, and I was impatient to see you both.'

'Why?' was the laconic inquiry.

'I have a great deal of news to communicate,' he said; 'may I sit down?'

'Certainly.'

There were two or three little rustic chairs scattered about the terrace, and he found one for Agnes and another for himself, waiting very courteously for Agnes to be seated in the first place.

Agnes sat down and glanced at him curiously. He was flushed a little with his walk or the excitement of the news he had come thither to impart, and his dark eyes were very bright and black in the sun, and seemed twinkling as with a thought of mischief. Still his voice was well-

regulated and clear, and his whole demeanour was cool and easy.

'In the first place, Mrs. Dangerfield,' he said, addressing himself exclusively to the old lady, 'I am desired by Estelle to inform you that she purposes visiting you to-morrow morning.'

'With her mother?'

'With or without her mother, according to circumstances,' was the reply, 'but she will certainly come.'

'I hope not without her mother's consent,' said Agnes, interposing.

'There is an idea of starting for town to-morrow afternoon, and Estelle has made up her mind to say good-bye to you both, before she goes,' said Hamilton. 'On that point, I have a strong idea she will be very firm.'

'If my daughter-in-law thinks such a leave-taking unnecessary, she will surely tell Estelle so,' said the old lady.

'Yes—exactly,' was the reply, 'but Estelle considers she will be deficient in common gratitude to leave Grayling without a word of thanks to her who saved her life. I think so, too.'

'You have been persuading her to come,' said old Mrs. Dangerfield, with excitement. 'You will make words between mother and daughter—you had no right to interfere.'

'I have not interfered,' he said, coolly.

'You said——'

'I said that I agree with Estelle's decision, Mrs. Dangerfield,' he remarked. 'So I do—but I have not attempted in any way to influence it. Estelle does not know what motives my cousin Frances has for keeping her away—she simply feels a gratitude and an affection towards Miss Challis, and she is coming to express her sentiments like a little lady, as she is.'

'You are enthusiastic, Mr. Redclove,' said old Mrs. Dangerfield.

'I hope not—I detest enthusiasm about anything—I always did. My friends would tell you that I am a cautious and calculating man—and I adopt a cautious policy this morning in warning you of Miss Dangerfield's approach.'

'In opposition to her mother's wishes—I don't like it,' muttered the old lady.

'The mother has expressed no wish concern-

ing Estelle's movements,' said Hamilton, coolly.

'You know that this step will displease my daughter-in-law.'

'On the contrary, I have an idea that she will be glad some day that this visit has been paid.'

'Agnes, we will drive over this evening, and forestall them,' said old Mrs. Dangerfield; 'it will save trouble to them and embarrassment to us.'

Agnes shook her head.

'I promised the mother I would keep away from the vicarage till she had left it,' said Agnes, 'and I must be as good as my word. Mr. Redclove can take my message of farewell to Estelle.'

'She will scarcely accept it as a hint not to call at Ilvercombe,' said Hamilton.

'I will write her a letter, implying that I do not expect to see her,' said Agnes.

'I am afraid the implication will not be perceived, Miss Challis, unless you are very plain-spoken, which it is possible to be,' he added, drily.

Agnes remembered that she had spoken out

very plainly what was in her mind when they had walked across the fields a few days since, and was uncertain whether to feel cross or pleased at his remembrance also.

'Still I will write,' she said, quietly.

'As you please,' answered Hamilton. 'I shall be pleased to act as messenger.'

The three were silent for a while after this, and the subject was concluded. Hamilton had made his announcement, and Aggie Challis and the old lady had commented upon it, and there was nothing more to be done but await the progress of events. Hamilton did not rise to take his leave, but, on the contrary, sat back in the rustic seat like a man tired out with his journey, and resolved to prolong his stay.

'Although this is quite a summer's day,' he said at last, 'I scarcely think it prudent for you, ladies, to sit without doors in the middle of December.'

'We are fond of fresh air, and used to it,' said the old lady.

'It is our town-bred dolts that take cold

readily,' said Hamilton. 'If I had my own way, I would never see town.'

'So great a lover of the country as that!' said Agnes, in surprise.

'I am sick of town,' he continued, 'and the vapidities of town-life have grown very wearisome to me. What a charming old place this is! I have not seen it since I was a boy, when I came here as a visitor, and was made very welcome.'

Mrs. Dangerfield, the elder, was flattered by these remarks, as he meant that she should be.

'You are welcome here now, Mr. Redclove. If you care to be the guest of an old woman—at any time—you may consider my house your home.'

'Thank you very much—I shall not forget an invitation which you gave me first at your daughter-in-law's house, and are now kind enough to renew.'

'The house is a dull one, and I am very poor company—but here is a study to write in, books to read, game, if you wish, to shoot. Come

when you will, Hamilton Redclove—I will not fail in giving you a welcome.'

'Thank you,' he said again, 'I may be here sooner than you think. Sponging on my friends' hospitality will become part of my profession, too, as the world goes round and leaves me undermost. You don't understand me?'

'I am very dull of comprehension sometimes. No, I don't understand you,' was the reply.

'Ah! I haven't told you all the news—not half the news—which has put me in good spirits this morning,' he said, laughing, 'which has shocked my cousin Frances—a poor lady who is shocked too easily—and shaken fashionable society not a little. My uncle has written to me announcing the fact of his second marriage.'

'Lord Redclove married again!'

Hamilton laughed very heartily at the old lady's amazement—it was an odd joke for him to relish in so genuine a fashion, but there was no affectation in his merriment.

'Ay, and what is more, the old boy has been married nearly twelve months, and has kept the affair a secret for fear the world should laugh at

his taking to himself a wife of nineteen, lest his daughter Frances and I should be too severe upon him also for pleasing himself before us.'

'He was always sly,' said the old lady, vindictively, 'and deceitful.'

'He has not all the virtues under heaven,' replied Hamilton, 'but then the Redcloves are not a virtuous race. Frances is the first saint in the family, I think, and Estelle comes in a bad second. As for me, I am full of hatred, envy, and uncharitableness. I never made a friend in my life; I have insulted or distrusted those who might have been my friends; I never believed in man or woman; I am altogether a bad lot. I have been under a cloud all my life—the dark, sullen thundercloud of a worldly uncle's patronage. Now,' he cried, cheerfully, 'I can step beyond it into a purer air, and breathe the freer for it.'

'Your uncle's marriage may make a difference to you,' said old Mrs. Dangerfield, thoughtfully.

'More news before you condole with me,' he said, lightly; 'my uncle's wife has presented Lord Redclove with a son and heir—Lord Red-

clove is in the seventh heaven of delight, and I am a poor commoner for ever.'

'Yes; that makes a difference to you indeed,' said the old lady. 'I am sorry for you, Hamilton.'

'It brings me down to earth with a run,' he said, with mock gravity; 'it pricks all the gas out of my bubble ambition, and leaves me a penniless prig in a world where prigs without money are almost as unendurable now-a-days as prigs with it. And, by the way, as I am so suddenly hard up, perhaps you will not mind asking me to stay to luncheon?'

'Certainly; but——'

'Thank you. Now, had we not better get in out of the cold?'

CHAPTER XV.

OF SEPARATE WORLDS.

Hamilton Redclove lunched at Ilvercombe, and made himself agreeable to the ladies. He was full of anecdote, and altogether at his ease —never was a man through whose hands a title had slipped in such spirits. A republican of the brightest red could not have treated his loss with more thorough contempt. In the genial, light-hearted being at Ilvercombe, Lord Redclove would have completely failed to recognise his stiff, starchy nephew, of whom he was more than half-afraid—whom he had never taken readily to his heart—and in whom he had not placed any confidence, private secretary though Hamilton was supposed to be.

Hamilton alluded once more, and only once more, to the change in his position which the birth of an heir to the Redclove estate had made for him. This was after luncheon, and when he had followed Agnes to the terrace again, having successfully talked the old lady into a drowsy state in less than ten minutes. Agnes had left them together, thinking they might like to speak of old times—of her father, of whom she knew so little—of Lord Redclove and Frances Dangerfield—and thinking, also, that they could speak more freely in her absence; but, in a short while, he was with her on the terrace, along which they walked slowly side by side.

'Mrs. Dangerfield is asleep,' he said; 'may I come and keep you company?'

'If you like,' Agnes answered.

'I daresay you think I have been acting very cleverly my part of philosopher this afternoon,' he said, 'for you looked at me suspiciously at luncheon more than once.'

'I hardly understood why you should not be sorry for your uncle's marriage, and for the loss of a title.'

'I ought to have been sorry, but the fact is, my expectations have always been just far enough in the background to keep me unsettled and restless. It was on the cards that my uncle would marry—the fact is accomplished. It was on the cards that he would not leave me a penny of his money, or an inch of his land—he has often hinted as much—and, lo, the money and land slide gracefully away from my clutches. As for the title—I never wanted it—more than once I have shuddered at the thought of acquiring it. Strange, is it not?'

'Yes; I think so—in you.'

'Why in me?' he asked, almost sharply.

'You have been brought up amongst the class that worships rank and family.'

'That's my misfortune, not my fault,' he answered, drily.

'I don't know whether you are satirising me, or not,' said Agnes, doubtfully; 'your ways are not my ways, and I shall not attempt to understand you.'

'I am not difficult of comprehension.'

'You have been always a mystery to me,' said Agnes, thoughtfully.

'I am sorry for that—because I hate mystery.'

'As much as you hate enthusiasm?' asked Agnes, archly.

'More so,' he said, laughing. 'Now, see what the loss of a title has done for me already. You are no longer afraid of me—you seem to have become—if I may say so,' he added, deferentially,—'almost my friend.'

'In one way, I have always thought of you as a friend, as I hope my brother has—but I have never been afraid of you, Mr. Redclove.'

'Then you ought to have been!'

'Those who have been kind to me live in my gratitude.'

'Ah! I think I hate gratitude, too. It makes you humble, and sets me a long distance away from the daughter of an old friend. I don't understand you, either,' he added, very quickly, as her colour mounted to her face; 'your character has troubled me a great deal, and, before I leave Grayling, I should like to read it like a book.'

'Why?'

'Your idea of your own character does not assimilate with all that Mr. Fayre and his daughter tell me.'

'I hope they have not been too hard upon me?'

'You know what they are likely to say?'

'Yes,' said Agnes, with a little sigh; 'they are very kind.'

'And Estelle, too——'

'Ah! poor Estelle!—it seems strange I shall not see her again!'

'But you shall see her.'

'No—not if I can help it.'

'Miss Challis, I am particularly anxious about this,' he said, earnestly; 'I am vexed at Estelle's mother's coldness and hardness; you are not being treated well by my cousin, and such poor pride as hers deserves a lesson.'

'Which I care not to give. You must consider me, Mr. Redclove, in this matter, too. I think I have a voice in it.'

'Undoubtedly.'

'It will not do me any good to receive

Estelle's thanks, or to see Estelle herself, in opposition to her mother's wish.'

'You forget Estelle is a very firm—even obstinate—young woman at times.'

'I will write to her before you leave to-day. When do you think of returning?'

Hamilton put his hands behind him, and looked down at the red gravel to consider the matter seriously.

'Well, I hardly know,' he said; 'it depends a great deal upon the old lady within there. If she asks me to dinner, I shall certainly stop.'

'Are you not expected back at the vicarage?' asked Aggie, in surprise.

'I hinted that my movements would be uncertain to-day. They are all inclined to pity me and preach at me—except Bella Fayre, who would laugh at me for two pins—and the general idea is that I am walking about the fields tearing my hair and railing against fortune, which has played me so vile a trick. I am glad to be away from them all—awfully glad. See what a terrible lot of their company I have had lately!'

Aggie laughed at his fears and his ingratitude—yes, they were almost friends already, and the loss of his chances had reduced him to a lower level, where she could meet him with less embarrassment. This was the first time she had encountered the real Hamilton Redclove—and he was pleasant company chatting in this light way to her. He knew much of her history, and did not shrink away, as young Mrs. Dangerfield did; he believed in her without an explanation too terrible and too unnecessary to make to him, and he was a hero through it all—a hero of the old days when life was cloud-land, and he shone through it, and came with helping hands towards Sam and herself. This was the fourth time they had met in their lives, and yet she could have called him friend always, if he had really wished it—and been proud of his friendship and interest for all time. She was no longer on her guard against him, as she had been, despite his charity, till that day. She felt that she could trust him now.

'Ilvercombe is a charming place,' said he. 'I

ought to have been here every day, and taken a dozen or two of sketches.'

'You paint?'

'I daub a little. I do nothing well—that is the worst of it—now I have to earn my own crusts.'

'You will remain your uncle's secretary, surely?'

'Private and confidential secretary—oh, no!—not after his want of confidence—and after that baby!' he added. 'Perhaps I shall get something under government abroad, or go into the wine trade, or buy an agency, or open a butcher's shop. I am anxious to begin real work, for the first time in my life—I have been playing at it, and loafing life away till now. Do you know anything of the Cape?—or about Kaffirs?'

Agnes shook her head.

'Never mind—we will not talk of this any more, please. I have come to Ilvercombe to evade it. Cannot you suggest another subject?' he inquired.

'Yes.'

'Pray do.'

'I have had something to puzzle me for days,' said Aggie.

'A conundrum? Let me hear it. I am fond of riddles.'

'Ah! you are laughing at me again!'

'I wouldn't laugh at you for——'

'"For worlds!"' said Aggie, quickly. 'Yes, that's the phrase, and the puzzle to me. When you walked with me across the fields last week, you said that you were coming on to Ilvercombe; when Ilvercombe was in sight, you told me you had altered your mind, and would not proceed further for worlds. Why was that?'

Hamilton did not answer at once. He studied the gravel path again, and locked his hands together behind his back, and was silent until they had reached the end of the terrace and turned.

'I am a changeable man; I don't know my own mind for half an hour together. I am distressingly versatile,' he said at last.

'That is not a fair reply.'

A shadow, as of disappointment at his evasion, passed across her face, and his quick, watchful glance detected it.

'I will tell you, if you are very curious,' he said.

'I am very curious.'

'And will not be offended with me?' he added.

'I do not readily take offence.'

'And will not be offended with me?' he repeated, very emphatically.

'No,' she replied.

'I will make a clean breast of it, then,' he said, ruefully. 'I *was* suspicious of you when I overtook you. I thought I was acting in the interests of the family by watching you. I had intended to come on here and be a foil to you and a spy, and to warn that solitary old woman against you. Before I had reached Ilvercombe, all my suspicions and my cunning projects for your discomfiture were trampled under foot, and I felt I was a coward and a cad. I turned back, Miss Challis, as heartily ashamed of myself as even you could wish me to be.'

Agnes Challis was silent in her turn for a few moments; then she said, quietly,

'Thank you for a better opinion of me than you had a week ago.'

'It was a free forgiveness you promised,' he said, meaningly.

'I have nothing to forgive,' she replied. 'I don't know why you should not have suspected me, and I wonder a little what I said that should have changed you from a spy to—to a friend, I was going to say,' she added, with a little laugh.

'Well, why not friend?'

'It is impossible.'

'I don't quite see that.'

'I do not want any friends,' was the abrupt answer.

'Thank you,' said Hamilton.

'Your world is not my world; yours is full of great, grand folk, and mine only holds myself, and needs nobody but myself for company.'

'That is hardly correct.'

'Why not?' asked Aggie, sharply.

'You have plenty of friends, according to your own showing. There are Mr. Fayre and his daughter, old Mrs. Dangerfield, and every humble inhabitant in Grayling to whom you have been kind.'

'Not of my world—not one of them,' she cried.

'Estelle Dangerfield!'

'A half-sister, whom the truth would frighten to death.'

'Daniel Overdown?'

'An impatient, hot-headed, unselfish being, heaven knows, but as apart from me and my life as you are.'

'I should like a little glimpse into this world of yours,' said Hamilton.

'It would not be worth the trouble to describe it, and it would be beyond your comprehension.'

'Shadow-land, perhaps?'

'Shadow-land and dream-land together.'

'An odd atmosphere for a quiet girl to exist in.'

'Still I exist,' was the quiet reply.

'But you are neither a shadow nor a dream.'

'I may pass away, like either,' she said, sorrowfully.

'I don't understand her yet,' thought Hamilton; but he did not answer her again, or seek to argue further with her. The new sadness on her face checked him, and there were thoughts there which his instinct told him to respect. This was no longer the light-hearted, laughing-faced Aggie Challis, who, at times, did not seem to have a care in the world, but who only had the gift of keeping her cares at a distance by strength of will and faith in herself.

He did not understand her; but he was wonderfully interested in her. Hardly as a friend, perhaps—he could not tell—he did not seek to know; but she was right in one thing, her world was not his, and her pride was not like his own. He believed in her now implicitly; she was as near a heroine in some respects as any woman he had ever met out of a book, and she was as brave as most book heroines. Yes, she would pass away like a shadow and a dream to him; he was going into active life somewhere, and

she would live and die in Warwickshire, probably; but for all that he should be very much obliged to old Mrs. Dangerfield if she asked him to stay to dinner presently.

CHAPTER XVI.

LATE-COMERS.

HAMILTON REDCLOVE *was* asked to dine at Ilvercombe. The invitation was not to be gracefully avoided, had old Mrs. Dangerfield wished to do so; for the young man betrayed no desire to depart, and evidently wished his visit to be considered as a something less formal and more friendly than a morning call. He had made up his mind to a long day; he spoke very plainly of the relief it was to him to be free of his relatives, and of their objectionable condolence with him on a loss which he affected not to deplore. The news had unsettled him certainly, and in his state of unsettlement he had walked across

the fields to the home where he had been always welcome in his boyhood. He trusted that he was welcome now, that the ladies would not send him back too quickly to his cousins' pity, and Mr. Fayre's long-winded exhortations to patience under worldly afflictions. He did not need pity, he said again, and he felt it would be ungrateful, although absolutely necessary, to return Mr. Fayre's sermon with sarcasm, if he had another dose of it before bedtime.

It did not require all these hints to secure an invitation to dinner from old Mrs. Dangerfield; but after it had been given and accepted, Hamilton still had an excuse or two to offer, lest his pertinacity should be considered as the persistence of an ill-bred man. He would have taken up his position as a friend of the family at once, but although the old lady was polite, and even at times genial, he felt that he was the stranger in the house, albeit a stranger who was welcome, and who improved upon acquaintance.

He was a cautious young man, too, who did not devote all his attention to Aggie Challis; he talked to the elder lady of past times, he

brought to her recollection episodes of the days when her son Paul lived, and he made rapid strides in her good graces. In the evening, when he rose to go, both women were sorry—Agnes because his pleasant, easy, if a trifle airy, manner was a relief to the dulness of the house in which she had immured herself, and because—if it be necessary to analyse our heroine's feelings at this early stage—she was interested in him, as an atom of the past that had drifted to the life in which he had acknowledged he was interested too. He was a new character to consider in her little world—a something different from the rest; and though, when she came to reflect more deeply, she might dislike him more, and trust him less, still he was a being to study, an agent in her life; a benefactor, even, who had been kind to Sam, and bore no malice because Sam had been ungrateful.

He was shaking hands with them and wishing them good evening when the clock was striking eight. There was a long walk before him across the fields; he should take that route as a cross-cut to Grayling, despite its loneliness,

he said; and then, as he turned to withdraw, the bell of the house—and an old sepulchral bell it was—clanged loudly.

'Visitors,' said Agnes, wonderingly.

'Estelle,' cried the old lady. 'I am sure of it.'

Hamilton became conscious of the old lady's reproachful glance in his direction, and he shrugged his shoulders as he said,

'I have had nothing to do with it. I think,' he added, 'it can scarcely be Estelle at this hour.'

He sat down to await the result, and in due course the servant announced,

'The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield and Miss Dangerfield.'

An instant afterwards, and Frances Dangerfield, tall and stately, and with her daughter at her side, was ushered into the drawing-room.

'This is an unexpected pleasure,' murmured the grey-haired lady, who was visibly embarrassed.

'Estelle and I thought it would be ungracious of us to leave Warwickshire without calling to wish you and Miss Challis good-bye,' said the

widow, 'and, as our movements are uncertain to-morrow, I hope you will excuse the lateness of the present visit.'

'You are welcome, Frances, at any hour,' replied the old lady.

'Thank you.'

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield turned to Agnes, who was steadily surveying her, and held her hand towards her frankly, and in a new manner to which our heroine had not been hitherto accustomed.

'Miss Challis, I am very glad to see you again,' she said, and her voice faltered just a little in the saying of it.

'I did not think that you——' And then Aggie paused; but young Mrs. Dangerfield guessed what she was going to say, and had instinctively refrained from saying.

'I have been proud and harsh to you; forgive an unhappy woman, and think no more of it,' Frances said, in a low tone.

'I am surprised,' replied Aggie, 'I hardly know——'

'I will explain at a later hour. Now talk

to Estelle,' said she, once more interrupting her.

She made room for her daughter, who dropped into the seat by Agnes's side, took both her hands in hers, and kissed her.

'My dear Aggie, why did you run away from us, and leave me to that teasing Bella Fayre? Grandmamma might have waited till I had gone back to London before snapping you up in this manner.'

'There was more room here,' said Agnes, 'and the vicarage was getting crowded.'

'You see we have come after you, and this cousin of mine who has deserted us for the attractions of your society,' she said, turning to Hamilton, half jestingly.

'Was I not recommended a long walk, to relieve the morbid character of my feelings, engendered by bad news?' Hamilton answered. 'Was it not impossible to sit still under affliction and loss?'

'Ah! poor Hamilton,' said Estelle, in pitying accents, 'I am afraid, Agnes, you have found him very dull and dispirited to-day.'

'No,' said Aggie, smiling, 'he has borne up against his misfortunes very well.'

'After all, what loss is it?' said Estelle. 'If my grandpapa, Lord Redclove, has married again, we have scarcely a right to call it a misfortune, and Hamilton is above any selfish considerations as to his own position. He——'

'Yes, yes; but don't say any more, Estelle, please,' he cried. 'Don't console me, for Go—goodness' sake. You cannot realise what a heavy loss I have sustained in being balked of an ancient and glorious title, to which I have looked forward from my cradle. You simple-minded women,' he said, 'cannot understand the height of a man's ambition, or the immeasurable depth of a man's despair.'

He groaned, and then walked gravely round the room with his hands behind him and his head bent downwards.

'Poor fellow,' whispered Estelle to Agnes, 'it is a blow to him; but mamma and I will be able to console him presently. It is not as if any loss to him would make any difference in us.'

'I do not think he requires any consolation,' Aggie quietly remarked.

'Ah! you do not know him as we do. You have not an idea how dreadfully ambitious he is,' Estelle continued.

'Perhaps not.'

'But you heard him just now?'

'Oh! yes,' said Aggie, quietly, 'I heard him.'

She had heard him with considerable astonishment; she had seen, moreover, the mock gravity of his demeanour, and the burlesque assumption of his disappointment very clearly, too, and Estelle Dangerfield had not. Estelle had not lived in a sphere where jests flourished, or eccentric humour was likely to be appreciated, and she believed in the misery which Hamilton, for some absurd reason or other, affected to be suffering from just then. Agnes did not like his acting—his 'making fun,' as it were, of his own ill-fortune—his taking her behind the scenes, and letting her see at what a poor value he estimated his cousin's advice and sympathy. She hastened to change the conversation, to speak of Estelle's recovery, of the journey to London to-morrow,

of the pleasant holiday it had been to Estelle, away from her town residence and her mother!

'I dread going back,' Estelle whispered; 'it is so terribly dull at home.'

'You will have friends there.'

'Yes, Hamilton will call again—he has half promised me that,' she said, colouring, as she whispered this important piece of news to Agnes: 'you remember, I told you I thought he had had once a few words with mamma about *me?*'

'Yes, yes, hush! Estelle please—don't talk of him now.'

'But I like to talk of him,' said Estelle, frankly.

'You think too much of him,' remarked Aggie, in a low tone, and speaking very quickly, 'and no girl should do that, until she is quite sure the man thinks too much of her. Why, Estelle, you have talked to me almost as if you and he were engaged to each other, and I have been led almost to think so.'

'I have told you the secrets of my heart,' she whispered, with a sigh, 'but I can't read his.'

'Don't try,' said Agnes; 'wait till he comes to read it for you, or till he goes abroad, and

you see he was not worth troubling your head about.'

'Abroad! Has he—has he said anything about going abroad?'

'A word or two, I think.'

Estelle turned very pale on the instant.

'Will you get me a glass of water, please,' she murmured.

Agnes was quick to dash into the dining-room in search of a glass of water; she returned with it to find the mother bending over Estelle, along with Hamilton and old Mrs. Dangerfield.

'The journey has been too much for her; she is not well yet,' said the grandmother.

'It was the long walk,' said Frances Dangerfield.

'Walk—you two!' exclaimed the old lady.

'Estelle was confident of her strength,' said Frances; 'and, of course, we should not think of riding on the Lord's-Day.'

'Ah, I forgot that!' replied old Mrs. Dangerfield, abruptly.

'I am better now,' murmured Estelle, as she took the glass of water from her half-sister's

hand, and put her lips to it; 'it was coming out of the fresh air into this hot room—that's all. The walk has not fatigued me in the least.'

'You must stop here to-night,' said the hostess; 'you must not expose her to any fresh fatigue.'

'Yes,' said Estelle's mother, 'if you will bear with us for a few hours, and we are not intruding on you too much, I should be very glad to accept your invitation.'

'There is plenty of room in this house for all who care to come and see me,' answered the old lady.

'Then I hope you will find room for me, some day,' said Hamilton, shaking hands with her again, and bowing very politely. 'Good-night, I must get back to the vicarage in time for prayers with Mr. Fayre. And to-morrow?'

He looked at his cousin Frances.

'To-morrow we shall return home, if all's well,' she said.

'Very good. You will require my escort to town, of course?' he added, after a pause, looking hard at the widow.

'As you please, Hamilton,' Frances said, quietly; 'I did not think you had an idea of remaining in Warwickshire.'

'Of remaining in Warwickshire, no; but of going to town, to be harassed to death by all the club-loafers, to hear their regrets, and their jokes, and their suggestions—I don't quite see it,' he replied, moodily; 'but still,' he said, with a suddenness that was a trifle startling, 'I can accompany you. Ladies travelling together are not quite safe in these chivalrous latter-days, cousin.'

'We can take care of ourselves, Hamilton,' said Frances, with a faint smile on her thin lips, 'so you will please yourself in escorting us to London. To-morrow will be time enough to arrive at a decision. Good-night, cousin.'

'Good-night.'

Hamilton Redclove turned his back upon Ilvercombe, and set forth across the fields at a smart pace, as if anxious to get back to the house whence his friends had departed, and the ladies, left to themselves, paired off, and changed partners, Frances Dangerfield

taking away Agnes Challis to a distant couch, out of ear-shot of the old lady and her granddaughter Estelle, who had settled down by the fireside.

'Now, Miss Challis, a few more words of explanation, to show I trust you and respect you,' said young Mrs. Dangerfield, earnestly.

CHAPTER XVII.

'THAT TERRIBLE PAST.'

THE difference in the manner of Estelle's mother to Agnes Challis was sufficiently remarkable for the younger woman to be anxious for the reason of it. She waited patiently for the explanation that had been promised her, replying not to the words with which our last chapter closed.

'I need not say Estelle knows nothing of your past or of mine, and I am as anxious as ever that she should remain in ignorance of it,' the widow continued; 'but don't mistake me,' she added, quickly, as Aggie seemed to draw herself up more stiffly on the instant. 'It

is not my pride, but to spare yours, and for the peace of mind of all of us, poor child!'

'Why do you pity me?' asked Agnes, curiously.

'Because you are deserving of a better life,' she answered; 'because I would make you my friend now, and I never, never can.'

'Why, that is pitying me for the loss of your acquaintance,' said Aggie, shrewdly, and a musical little laugh escaped her that jarred somewhat on the susceptibilities of the widow.

'I don't mean that,' said Frances Dangerfield. 'You must not be too severe or too quick to retort upon me, as you have done. I come in a chastened spirit—I am not your enemy.'

'No; but you may be, madam,' was the reply. 'It is more than possible you will be.'

'Why?' asked the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, surprised in her turn.

'It will always be impossible for you to like me, and it will be so easy to hate, presently,' said Aggie, sadly.

'Is it probable I shall hate the girl who saved my child's life, and whom I have not thanked

from the fulness of my heart yet? Why should hate follow the remembrance of your courage?'

'I am *her* daughter, madam—and you can never forget that, or forgive it,' said Agnes, boldly.

Frances Dangerfield gave a perceptible shiver.

'I have nothing to forget or forgive, so far as you are concerned,' she said. 'I have seen my pride in a different light to-day—and a good man has not shrunk from teaching me a new truth.'

'Mr. Fayre?' said Agnes.

'Yes. I didn't know he was so earnest a Christian,' she murmured. 'I did not know my own faults, until he showed them to me. I have been wilfully blind until to-day.'

'Is it at his request that you have come to me?'

'It is at the promptings of a heart which he has softened towards you. If I have been harsh and ungrateful, Agnes, pray forgive me. I have suffered much in my life, and am not the woman I was.'

'I have nothing to forgive, Mrs. Dangerfield,' said Agnes, taking the extended hand again. 'I could hardly expect you to look upon me kindly. And you—ah! you helped to break my mother's heart.'

Agnes Challis dropped the hand as she spoke, and there was a slight contraction of the high, white forehead.

'You will understand me now, Agnes,' said Frances Dangerfield, after a long pause, 'that, had circumstances been different, I should have been proud of you for a friend, and to see you my daughter's friend.'

'I might have been of help to Estelle; she is very weak, and I am interested in her,' said Agnes, thoughtfully.

'Yes; but you will see how impossible it is that any friendship can exist without a terrible secret escaping, and tarnishing the father's memory.'

'And shocking the pride that is left still in the mother,' added Agnes. 'Ah! madam, I don't blame you,' she cried, as her listener winced perceptibly. 'I should be proud, too,

in your place, and, knowing so little of the husband's life as you did. I—I don't think we shall act unwisely in going our separate ways. The path we should tread together is neither pleasurable nor safe.'

'That is true,' the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield asserted.

'But the terrible secret you speak of may escape without your help or mine.'

'I hope not—I pray not,' cried the widow.

'For whose sake, Mrs. Dangerfield?' was the calm inquiry.

'For all our sakes. For my own—Estelle's —yours.'

'Don't think of me in this matter—and don't fear me. I have been on guard all my life.'

'You are to be trusted,' murmured young Mrs. Dangerfield. 'I have heard much of your earnestness and faith, in Grayling—and you will not——'

'Pardon me, Mrs. Dangerfield,' said Aggie, with sudden excitement, 'but you must not bind me to a promise. I make none—I have no compact with you, none whatever.'

'I cannot comprehend you,' said the amazed widow.

'I have a mission to fulfil.'

'But you would not speak of the past again —you would not bring to light all those details which time has set mercifully from us—you have just said——'

'I have said "Don't fear me," Mrs. Dangerfield —that is all I *can* say.'

Mrs. Dangerfield the younger dropped her voice to a still lower whisper.

'Will you tell me in perfect confidence all you suspect? It may be in my power to undeceive you. I know more of the history of your erring father's life than you can possibly know.'

'There is nothing you can tell me, with which I am not acquainted,' replied Agnes, very sadly, 'and there is much of which you have never dreamed.'

'I cannot credit that,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, confidently.

'Well—well—we cannot discuss it together. Estelle is looking towards us and wondering

what we are whispering about. Shall I leave you?'

'If you please. And if at any time I can be of——'

'Thank you,' said Agnes, interrupting her, 'and let me thank you also for your kinder feelings towards me. I am grateful—I shall be still grateful when you doubt me afresh.'

'I shall have no cause to doubt you again.'

Agnes Challis did not answer. She rose and walked to the side of her half-sister, whom she was never to acknowledge, and old Mrs. Dangerfield crossed the room to her daughter-in-law who, with her long thin fingers interlaced, had already drifted into deep thoughts of her own, from which the feeble voice at her elbow did not readily arouse her.

'You two have been talking of *him*,' said the old lady, almost sharply.

'Yes.'

'It is no use—no good—I tell you!' cried the elder woman, with considerable excitement.

'I know it, but Agnes Challis talks of the past, as if I, whom it crushed, were ignorant of its power; ignorant of the miserable truths which make up that bitter story,' cried the widow, querulously.

'Let the truth lie with my dead son,' said the old lady, solemnly; 'part of it drove me mad after his accident, and, coming back to reason, I have hardly dared to face the rest. You and she may have to do it when I have gone.'

'What is the rest?'

'I will tell you before you go away.'

'We leave to-morrow.'

'There will be time enough. It is a strange fate that sets you and Agnes Challis in this house together. I have been waiting for it all these years.'

'What is it you wish to tell me, that you cannot tell me now?'

'Agnes is watching us,' replied old Mrs. Dangerfield; 'she is a dear, good girl, but she does not trust you or me much. Are you tired?'

'No.'

'I will come to your rooms when the house is still, then. Sit up for me.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

SISTERLY.

YOUNG Mrs. Dangerfield was startled by the suggestion of her mother-in-law. She was a strong-minded woman in her way, but this sudden proposition to call upon her, in her room, 'when the house was still,' was scarcely an agreeable idea. There was time enough to-morrow for a conference—time enough surely—and the matter could not have become suddenly of any grave importance. If she had not called to make friends with Agnes Challis, she would have been allowed to return to town without any communication on the subject, and the mystery—if there were any—would have

been kept back from her for all time. She did not believe in any mystery concerning her husband's past; she could imagine what a girl like Agnes Challis might think, if the mother were romantic and false, but of the truth of the story she knew every bitter fact, from the beginning to the end. The past she would avoid—she had been years thrusting it aside—and she was only curious to know what this strange old lady wished her and Agnes Challis to do after her death. To face all the truth she had implied, as if the truth had not blasted her happiness years ago, and aged her years before her time. As if it were still lurking in the background, biding its cruel hour to strike her down again, when she knew—thank God!—that it was for ever now impotent for evil.

The mother-in-law did not give her an opportunity to suggest another time and place for the conference; she walked away from her, and rejoined the two girls chatting by the fireside—where the widow followed her. It was a strange party of four—three women knowing so much of a secret which had influenced

materially their lives, and the fourth belonging to it, and yet completely ignorant of the story, and suspecting nothing. To Estelle Dangerfield's life there had been no marvels—only dulness, and monotony, and prayer-meetings—a dead grey woof flecked by one bright thread which she had woven-in herself, and spelt a lover's name with very vainly. Well, it was folly to be wise in her case, for what could wisdom do but rob her of the one day-dream she would ever have. Time enough for her poor knowledge when the waking ensued in the heat of that day in which no fragile hopes of hers could exist. Her mother had attempted to arouse her once, and the poor, faint effort had half-killed the dreamer. It is not given to every woman to be strong and wise and self-reliant, and Estelle was singularly weak, and vain, and childish, thought the mother. The reader may think so, too, when this outline sketch of womanhood deepens in colour on our canvas.

The night wore on, and the hour grew late before the four women separated. Old Mrs.

Dangerfield sat and listened to Estelle and Agnes with evident interest, watching both girls with such eager intentness that her daughter-in-law feared that even Estelle would think it very strange. Sitting side by side, Estelle and Agnes were strikingly alike in height and figure, and might have passed for sisters anywhere—their fair hair was almost of the same shade, Aggie's a trifle darker, perhaps, and only fairly glittering with gold in the sunlight which she loved. Here the resemblance ceased, for Estelle was pallid and plain, and her lack-lustre, grey eyes did not compare favourably with the brilliancy and depth of the hazel orbs of her half-sister. Old Mrs. Dangerfield remarked all this, and a train of thought followed, born of her observance, that took her at last far away from present company. When she awoke from her reverie, it was striking eleven—a late hour for folk at Ilvercombe to be astir.

'So late,' she murmured, 'and you have forgotten time, too, Agnes.'

'It seems like it.'

'I had no idea it was eleven o'clock,' cried

Estelle, 'but time always passes swiftly with my friend.'

The delicate hand touched Agnes Challis's affectionately, and Estelle's face glowed with a pleasure that was not common to it.

'Do you remember how many scoldings Mr. Fayre has given us because we have sat up in our room and talked too much, and he could hear our voices and laughter through the wall?' cried Estelle.

'Is it so long ago that I should have forgotten it?' rejoined Aggie.

'Will it ever come again?'

'I don't know.'

'I don't see why it shouldn't,' said Estelle, glancing at her mamma; 'I have not come to say good-bye for ever to the dear girl who brought me back to life. That is not likely; is it, mamma?'

'There is no telling what may happen in this world,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, sententiously; 'Miss Challis may not care to leave her friends in Warwickshire.'

'Then I will come to Warwickshire again

some day—promising beforehand not to skate upon thin ice, and frighten poor mamma with telegrams, and bring her a long journey for nothing. I often wish now,' she added, still with Aggie's hand in hers, 'that I had known you years and years ago.'

'Why?' asked Agnes.

'I should have been a stronger girl—I should have learned my lesson from you, and been less apathetic and dull, and more of a companion to mamma.'

'You *are* a companion, Estelle,' remarked the mother, emphatically; 'and I have missed you very much.'

'Yes,' answered Estelle, with a sigh, 'but, if Aggie had been with me all her life, I think I should have grown more like her. I should have caught her manner, and grown up less of a poor stick.'

'Estelle!' cried the mother, peevishly, 'I wish you would not talk in this way. It is undignified and ridiculous.'

'Bella Fayre always called me "a stick" at school, although Bella likes me very much.

But,' added Estelle, more thoughtfully still, 'I should not have cared for Bella to be a sister of mine, as I have often wished that you were.'

Once more the hand of the widow's daughter passed fondly over that of the girl's at her side, and the widow was strangely moved to see it. There was more affection shown by Estelle for Agnes Challis than had been ever demonstrated to the mother. Was there something more than a girl's liking in this for Estelle's natural passiveness, her imperturbability, to be so lacking now?

Agnes was very calm. She was a strong young woman, whose feelings were not likely to give way at a chance word that struck home.

'Sisters don't always agree,' she said, laughing, 'and are not always the best of friends. We are better as we are.'

'Ah! you don't care for me as you do for Bella, I know,' answered Estelle, with a touch of her mother's jealousy in her tone of voice; 'but then you haven't known me so long, and Bella is a bright girl, whom everybody likes. I wish I was Bella Fayre.'

'You seem to wish to be everybody but yourself this evening, Estelle,' said the mother, reprovingly. 'How strange you are, child!'

Estelle sighed again, but made no answer. When Agnes rose, she sprang to her feet also.

'Are you going to your room?'

'Yes. I am an early riser, you know.'

'You might have asked me to share your room to-night, as we used at dear old Grayling. I have so much to tell you, Aggie—and to-morrow it is good-bye!'

Agnes Challis looked at the mother, who said, in a low tone,

'I have no objection, if Miss Challis has not.'

'Thank you,' murmured Agnes. Then adieux were interchanged, and the two young women went out of the room with their arms linked lovingly together. They passed into the dining-room, where the portrait on the wall seemed to look down upon them, and to smile at them as they entered.

Estelle glanced up at it.

'That is like my father—why, it must be he!' she said.

'Yes—when he was a very young man, I believe.'

'I don't think mamma has seen this yet. Shall I——'

'No; I would not disturb her. Such a picture might pain your mother even now,' said Agnes, retaining the arm which would have slipped away from her.

'Yes; poor mother!—poor father!'

'Ah, poor father!' murmured Aggie Challis.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TWO MRS. DANGERFIELDS.

The women left behind in the large drawing-room sat very still and patient after the door had closed on the half-sisters. The fire was becoming hollow and cavernous, and the gilt clock on the mantel-piece was ticking away another hour, and yet neither woman moved. Both were full of grave, earnest thoughts, and there were tears in the eyes of the younger, to whom tears had never risen readily, thanks to her powers of self-repression.

Suddenly the withered hand of the old lady touched quickly the stiff black dress of Frances.

'Don't you see the hand of Fate in this?' she asked.

'No,' was the reply.

'You are a deeply religious woman, and will call it the finger of God, perhaps,' said the other, almost mockingly.

'There is God's hand everywhere. It was His will that they should meet—for what end, I know not,' murmured the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield.

'Why should they not be friends—even with this secret kept away from Estelle?' asked the old lady. 'It is natural, and Estelle wishes it.'

'I should not know a minute's peace—a minute's happiness again.'

'I cannot see why.'

'Agnes Challis would part me and my child, as her mother parted me and my husband.'

'I don't believe it,' was the flat contradiction proffered.

'You do not know Estelle. Despite her constitutional apathy, she has turned with a warmth of affection to this stranger that she has never shown to me.'

'Never!' echoed the mother-in-law.

'They were strangers till they met at Mr. Fayre's.'

'It was the hand of Fate,' muttered old Mrs. Dangerfield again.

There was another long pause; then she said, suddenly,

'You are an odd woman, Frances, to envy your daughter one friend.'

'Estelle is the only friend I have in the world,' was the reply.

'Then it is jealousy that influences you after all?' said the old lady, curiously.

'My wish to keep my child's love to myself stands first assuredly,' Frances replied; 'but, without that, I would not have those two girls friends for all the world.'

'Ah! well, well,' said the old lady, rising slowly, with her eyes still fixed upon the fire, 'your happiness first, and Estelle's second. I think I understand.'

'No,' said the other, 'don't think so. I would die to-morrow for Estelle's happiness, which Agnes Challis has no power to promote.'

'I think she has.'

'No,' said the other, very decisively.

The old lady approached her daughter-in-law closely.

'Is there a lover?'

'No.'

'Some one whom she loves—hopelessly?' was the next shrewd question.

'Don't ask me, please,' entreated Frances Dangerfield—'I cannot speak of it now. I am tired with my long walk—the hour is very late—and you have something to communicate before we say good-night, you say?'

'Yes; in your own room, not here.'

'Unless to-morrow——' began Frances.

'No, to-night,' said old Mrs. Dangerfield, decisively.

'Is it so very important, then?' asked the daughter-in-law, nervously.

'You have come here for the news. Destiny has brought you.'

'Are you a fatalist,' asked the younger woman, 'that you speak of Destiny and Fate so much?'

'That's it,' whispered the other, meaningly.

Was she quite sane even now, thought the widow, to talk like that and look like that? She could have wished that their next interview was for the morning rather than for the dead of night—curious as she might be as to all which Paul's mother had to relate.

'Good-night—for the present,' the old lady added, significantly; 'my maid Therese will show you to your room; it adjoins my own, and I shall not have far to come.'

She touched the bell, and Therese, a sour-looking young woman, with an expression of having been kept up hours beyond her usual time plainly visible upon her countenance, responded to the summons.

'Show Mrs. Dangerfield to her room, and then come back to me,' said her mistress.

'Yes, madame.'

Therese led the way through the dining-room, where the picture hung of the husband, and the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield glanced at it without a tremor of lip or eyelid, although she had not looked at it since her husband took

her over to Ilvercombe to see his mother in their courting days. He was proud of his picture then, and she was proud of him—the world was bright with her, and she was a young girl like Estelle. The contrast between the past and the present might have moved her, but she did not show it, and she went on with her grave, stately steps after the maid, who might be watching her, for what she knew to the contrary.

It was a rambling mansion, full of shadow at that hour, with a big, wide oaken staircase leading to long corridors, where their footsteps echoed strangely. It was a house that at any time should have been full of light-hearted guests to give life and cheerfulness to it, and was wholly unfit for the lonely old woman who had stolen back and tried hard to call it home, because it was like home to her when her son Paul was living. Now it was like a vault, with the open doors of empty rooms yawning ominously, as the widow went along the corridor.

'Which is Miss Challis's room?' she inquired of the maid.

'We have passed it, madame. It is the first on the left as we turned.'

'Estelle is a long way from me,' thought the mother to herself.

At the extremity of the corridor they paused and turned into a second long gallery, lighted by an oil lamp swinging from the ceiling. At the first door Therese stopped.

'This is madame's apartment. My mistress sleeps in the next.'

Madame's room was large and well-lighted by wax candles, with a fire burning cheerfully in the grate. Only the sombre brown hangings to the window and the bedstead quenched the light a little.

'Good-night, madame,' said Therese.

'Good-night,' answered the widow; then she sat down in a chair by the fireside, drew a small Testament from her pocket, and began to read with grave attention. It was her nightly custom, from which she never swerved and of which she seldom tired, though there had been nights of weariness when it had been somewhat of a struggle to take to heart the long chapters of

faith and promise from which her life had gathered some courage, if no cheerfulness. It was a night of weariness then, for she had been tried much that day, and had resisted trial and advice, and succumbed, and all that hard fight with her pride, and Mr. Fayre's exhortations had tired her as much as the long walk which she and her daughter had had. She read on bravely and steadily until the hand relaxed and the eyes drooped more and more over the small text of the pocket-Testament, which finally fell from her hand into her lap. How long she had slept she did not know; but the fire had burned down, and the wax candles were less in length by an inch or more, when she woke up with a start, and a low cry of alarm at discovering old Mrs. Dangerfield standing on the hearthrug in a long, black, trailing dressing-gown, with a hood, like a nun's, drawn half over her withered face.

'I did not know you at first,' said Frances, after a little struggle with her breath. 'How long have you been there?'

'Ten minutes. You sleep soundly, Frances, over your religion.'

It was the second taunt which had escaped the old woman since the widow had come to Ilvercombe, and Frances shivered at it.

'I did not think I should have been wicked enough to sleep over God's Word,' she said; 'it is not my custom.'

'Ah! well, the sleep may do you as much good.'

'You should not talk like this to me,' said the widow, resenting the mother-in-law's remarks at last. 'You are at an age when God's Word is of great value to you surely—of great comfort?'

'No, it is not. I am a woman with a heart of stone.'

'I hope not.'

'I try to repent, but I still go on in my own stern fashion to the end. What comfort can religion give me when I have made up my mind to that?' she said, with her eyes flashing in the candle-light from under her grey brows.

'But you——'

'There, I have not come to you for consolation,' said the old lady, abruptly; 'I am no

hypocrite, and I tell you the truth in answer to your question.'

'But you distress me very much,' said Frances; 'all this is dreadful.'

Old Mrs. Dangerfield sat down in a chair that was facing Frances, and said,

'Don't preach to me, child; you are not a religious woman yourself.'

'I am sorry for your bad opinion of me, Mrs. Dangerfield.'

'I cannot believe it; you do not act like a religious woman—you never will,' said the old lady, thoughtfully; 'there is the Redclove blood in you.'

'You have not come to tell me this?' asked the lady, fluttering with indignation. She was deeply wounded, now that her piety had been questioned, and she took no pains to conceal the evidence of it.

'No, you are right,' was the answer. 'Let me tell you what I have upon my mind, Frances, before I try to sleep to-night. Sleep is forgetfulness of this world, and so a blessing which seldom falls to my lot.'

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield waited for the explanation. She would not hazard further comment lest her visitor should drift once more from the subject which had brought her to that room. There was a painful silence, for the old lady seemed inclined to relapse into reverie, and there was no effort from the other to arouse her. It was a strange interview between two women who were stranger and weaker than they thought.

The voice of the old lady broke softly the silence at last.

'The little that I have to tell you,' she commenced, 'and which I should have written to you concerning in a few days, I shall tell Agnes Challis before she leaves for Grayling. Thus,' she added, as she leaned forward in a precise business-like way, with one finger beating time in the palm of the other hand, 'putting you two on an equality to fight your battle out as best may please you both, after I am dead.'

'After you are dead,' repeated the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield.

'Though I am not a religious woman,' she

added, almost sarcastically, 'I have striven to act justly, to atone for my mistakes and Paul's, —for all the mistakes which have followed one false step in my son's life.'

'Can you make atonement for *his* sins?' her listener asked, wonderingly.

'He never sinned knowingly,' was the quick reply; 'it was in his ignorance, I tell you.'

'What do you mean?' was the perplexed cry here.

'I don't think you and Agnes will have long to wait for the explanation,' said the old woman. 'I leave it to you both, and it may be an awful legacy for you.'

'You cannot mean you think Paul——'

'I will not listen to you. I will not say. I don't know the whole truth any more than that girl downstairs,' cried the old woman, lifting her arms wildly in the air for an instant. 'I have dreaded it too much. But when I am dead, in Paul's room, looking on the park,' she said, suddenly becoming calm and business-like again, 'his little room, where all the books are, in the great iron safe, of which I keep the key upon

my bunch, you and Agnes Challis will find a packet of papers, and one copy of my will, of which the second lies at my solicitor's, in Warwick. Those papers you two women are to read together, and in all charity and mercy towards each other, if you can. They will explain my will, which you will understand more clearly afterwards.'

'What papers can they be, which I have not heard of until now, and which should be in my possession by right of legacy?'

'They were never intended for your eyes, Frances. They were lodged at the house of a friend of Paul's, at Chester, where Paul lived once with Agnes's mother.'

'At Chester!'

'It was in endeavouring to obtain those papers for her mother, along with other property, that Agnes Challis was arrested, tried, and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. They were papers which belonged to the mother, and yet which had got into other people's hands, and were deposited for safety with them.'

'Deposited by whom?'

'I don't know exactly—I cannot say.'

'Do you suspect Paul?' asked Frances Dangerfield.

'I think it was likely Paul put them there, or even Lord Redclove, or even the mother herself. The fact never came out at the trial of Agnes Challis, who was found one night with that property in her possession, which she said was her mother's, and belonged to her mother—which she had come to secure—and which those who prosecuted her swore was theirs.'

'How did she know the papers were there?'

'From the mother, probably,' was the reply. 'It was a deep plot to obtain what she thought was her rights from those who had engaged her as a governess, not knowing who she was. The mother would not move in the matter, had been pledged not to move, I think, and Agnes Challis had sketched this plan out, and acted very rashly, as it proved, for herself.'

'Yes, very rashly. But——'

Old Mrs. Dangerfield did not let her finish.

'It was in her effort to see the mother, to

drag her from her sick-bed to the trial, as a witness to the truth and honour of the daughter —to appear himself perhaps in her defence— that your husband met his death.'

'My God!'

'Agnes was condemned without a witness to speak on her behalf; father and mother were both helpless, and she would not say a word in her own defence.'

'I do not see the truth now; it is all very dark and inexplicable.'

'Ah! it may drive you mad presently—it did me,' said the old woman, bitterly.

The younger woman turned away from her at last. She was sick at heart, and tortured by a hundred doubts. The cruel truth seemed very close upon her.

'That is all I have to say,' said the old woman, rising; 'it has been on my mind for years. When I have told Agnes Challis, I may feel happier. I don't know,' she added, with a sigh; 'but I may.'

She gathered her black gown around her, wrapped herself in its folds, and went away

silently from the room, without another word, like the grim Fate in which she affected to believe.

Meanwhile, Frances Dangerfield turned more closely to the fire, clasped her hands together, and looked steadily at the dancing flames. Yes, she was very near the truth; and it might wreck her presently, though she would not believe it—never, never, never! It would be all part of a new plot, with her husband's mad mother in it, too, and acting against her.

To think she should have ventured to this house after all, and been lured into the trap set for her discomfiture. She would have been glad to feel indignant at this supposition, but there was no anger at her heart—only a stony horror, which lay at her heart's core like a stone. She must wait, and bear it—wait for this mysterious woman's death, even if in waiting she grew grey and old, and full of stern uncharitableness again. What *was* she waiting for? The Testament slid from her lap into the fire-place, but she was not aware of it.

The fire blazed and burned away, and grew hollow and cavernous, and still she sat there brooding.

CHAPTER XX.

ESTELLE IS A LITTLE EXCITED.

FRANCES DANGERFIELD came down to breakfast the next morning as calm and grave as though nothing had disturbed her peace of mind since her husband's death. Agnes and Estelle were on the garden-terrace with extensive wrappings round their heads and shoulders—they were laughing lightly as though they were far away from trouble, and the widow watched them sadly through the window glass. The wind had veered round in the night, and the air blew keen and frosty from the north once more. Frances opened the French window.

'Estelle, is it not too cold for you this morning?' said the mother.

'Oh, no, mamma. The frost agrees with me

wonderfully,' cried Estelle; then good-mornings were exchanged, and the girls entered the breakfast-room, flushed with exercise.

'Your grandmamma is late this morning,' said Agnes to Estelle, 'she has been a very early riser since my stay here.'

'She was up late last night,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield.

'That should make no difference,' answered Agnes, 'she sits up late as a rule.'

The maid Therese entered the room with the same sour expression of yesternight. There was another grievance on her mind now:—she had had three times to perambulate long corridors, and descend steep stairs with messages from her mistress to the servants, and this made the fourth commission with which she was entrusted.

'My mistress's compliments, and begs you will excuse her attendance at the breakfast-table this morning,' was the message formally delivered.

'Mrs. Dangerfield is not ill?' asked Agnes at once.

'No, Miss Challis; at least she says she is not ill, and will be downstairs shortly.'

'She will breakfast in her own room, then?' asked Agnes.

'She will not take any breakfast at present,' replied Therese.

'You will excuse me for an instant,' said Agnes, 'but I am afraid Mrs. Dangerfield is unwell.'

'Shall I come with you?' asked Frances Dangerfield.

'It may alarm her; she is used to me,' answered Agnes, as she hurried away, leaving mother and daughter together.

'I hope grandmamma is not going to be ill,' said Estelle.

'I hope not.'

'We can scarcely leave the house to-day now, mamma,' suggested the daughter, quickly.

'No,' said the mother, very thoughtfully, 'it would not be wise.'

'Wise, mamma!'

'It would not be kind of us, I mean.'

The door opened, and Agnes re-appeared with

brighter looks than when she had departed.

'It is nothing,' she said. 'Mrs. Dangerfield says it is nothing, and she will be with us presently.'

Before breakfast was completed the old lady came into the room, leaning on the arm of her maid, and looked hard at each of her guests in turn. She was a shade or two more sallow, and the right hand shook a little, as it rested on the arm of the chair into which she slowly relapsed.

'I hope I haven't frightened you,' she said, apologetically; 'I was tired when I awoke, but the feeling has worn off now. I am not going to die yet awhile, as you young folk will see.'

She smiled grimly, as at a jest which was not particularly calculated to promote general hilarity, and then called Estelle to her.

'You and your mamma will not run away from me,' she said, very gently.

'Mamma has already decided on remaining another day, grandmamma.'

'Ah, has she?' was the slow reply, 'I am not

sorry. You do not come very often to see me, and the house is dull without a friend in it.'

'I have already remarked that it would be hardly kind to leave Ilvercombe if you are unwell,' said Frances Dangerfield.

'I am quite well; but, if you will stay, I shall be obliged to you,' replied the old lady.

'I shall be glad to stay,' was the evasive reply, 'if I can be of any service.'

'Otherwise?' interrogated the old lady.

'Otherwise, I would certainly prefer to keep to my original intention of departure.'

Old Mrs. Dangerfield nodded her head once or twice, gravely, at the hearth-rug, as if considering the answer which her daughter-in-law had given her.

'Stay to-day,' she said at last, and young Mrs. Dangerfield assented.

Estelle, thinking but little of her grandmother's ailments, we fear, gave a sigh of pleasure at the ultimatum.

'A reprieve,' she whispered to Agnes; 'one more day at Ilvercombe together.'

The shadow stole to the face of the mother,

whose keen ears had heard this—the mother whose ill-luck it was in life to be always discontented. Estelle did not wish to return; there were no attractions at home for her. Away from home, she was a different woman altogether. Frances wished that she had started for town before the day was over; there was no object in remaining. Save a little extra drowsiness at times, old Mrs. Dangerfield was well and strong, for her years—and Estelle was too happy! She did not envy her daughter's happiness, perhaps, even if it was at the expense of her own, though the old anxiety, the old, odd fear of losing her daughter's love oppressed her; but she would be glad to get away. What was she staying in Warwickshire for?—lest the old woman should die, and Agnes Challis see the papers first?—those papers which she dreaded her seeing—heaven knew why—for she did not believe that morning that there was any further revelation shadowed forth therein. The night's fear had passed away with the night's darkness. She was almost sure of that, when she called her pride to her aid, and looked back at the

past, when she was Lord Redclove's daughter; there was only a fitful doubt, now and then, as she glanced at the lined face of the woman in the chair. Probably old Mrs. Dangerfield was still a little mad, she thought.

CHAPTER XXI.

MORE CONFIDENCE.

FRANCES DANGERFIELD did not go back to London that day, or the next, or the next ensuing. The old lady drooped suddenly at times, and then as suddenly rallied; she was not ill, but she kept her friends watchful, and it was evident that she was not her usual self. Every morning she asked her dead son's wife, as a favour, to remain another day, and Frances assented, and appeared by degrees to become reconciled to her new position at Ilvercombe Park.

'I don't want a doctor,' said the mistress of the house, 'only friends about me; they will restore me more quickly.'

She had taken a fancy to Hamilton Redclove's society also, and that young gentleman was very constant in his attendance, and interested to an extraordinary degree in the state of the old lady's health. He was always in wonderful spirits, too, and, when he railed against his own ill-luck again, it was in so burlesque a fashion that even Estelle at last saw that he was jesting.

For a while then—alas! it is only for a while in this world of cross-purposes—there were pleasant days and happy hours. Mr. Fayre and his daughter Bella drove over in their humble pony-chaise to see their friends, and inquire after the old lady's health; and there was often a quiet little party of an evening in the drawing-room, with old Mrs. Dangerfield very bright and chatty towards the small hours, when life rekindled in her marvellously.

Very shrewd, too, was the hostess. Once when Doctor Middleton of Grayling looked in 'quite accidentally,' she said, after he had gone,

'Who asked that man to come and see me?'

'I confess,' said Agnes, demurely.

'It was like your impudence, child,' said the

old lady, not unkindly; 'but there was no necessity to send for him. Did he not say so?'

'He thought you were looking fairly well,' Agnes replied.

'Could you not have seen that for yourself?' inquired Mrs. Dangerfield.

'Yes. But his opinion strengthens ours, and takes a weight from our hearts.'

'You are growing a flatterer, Agnes. Who has been giving you lessons, I wonder?'

'Mr. Redclove has been flattering her all the afternoon,' said Bella Fayre; 'I know he has by her blushes.'

'I deny the imputation,' cried Hamilton, with a faint exhibition of colour on his own cheeks; 'it is impossible to flatter Miss Challis.'

'Meaning she deserves all the compliments which you pay her?' inquired Bella, saucily.

'Meaning, Miss Fayre, that she will not take a compliment without believing the giver of it is laughing in his sleeve.'

He glanced meaningly at Agnes, whose turn it seemed to look confused. There was more meant by this than either she or Mr. Redclove

cared to acknowledge to general company; and one woman turned pale for an instant, as with a sudden envy that had seized her. It was Estelle's first suspicion, first experience, perhaps, that she was as jealous as her mother; and life seemed suddenly to become a terribly depressing affair.

She became, almost against her will, very watchful of Hamilton and Agnes Challis; and once, when late in the evening he spoke to Aggie, bending so low over her that their heads nearly touched, she felt her sad little heart stabbed sharply again.

When the two girls were in their room that night—it had been a long, weary, never-ending night to Estelle—Agnes was startled by her companion suddenly flinging herself into her arms, and weeping bitterly upon her shoulder.

'My dear child,' cried Agnes, soothing her as one might soothe an infant in distress, 'what is the matter?'

'I am wretched—dreadfully wretched,' Estelle cried; 'I wish I was dead and out of the way for good.'

'For what reason?'

'Hamilton does not love me,' she exclaimed; 'I see that now; I have been a blind fool too long.'

'You are rash, Estelle.'

'He is falling in love with you, and you know it,' cried the other, indignantly.

'It will be a sad instance of unrequited affection, then,' said Agnes, laughing very unaffectedly.

'You don't like him?' was the eager question here. 'Say you don't like him, and I'll try to believe you.'

'On the contrary, I like him very much.'

'But you don't really—love him?'

'Not in the least,' answered Aggie, confidently; 'what should I see in that man to fall in love with, even if he were my equal—even if he came down from his grand world to patronise me exclusively?'

'You would not have him?'

'Assuredly, Estelle, I would not have him.'

'I thought everybody would like my Hamilton,' she said, drying her eyes very quickly now,

'and I am afraid I have made a sad little silly of myself to you. It was all through that wicked Bella Fayre; I shall never like her again.'

'That would be hardly just to poor Bella,' Agnes remarked.

'Bella meant something,' said Estelle, very feverishly still; 'Hamilton *has* said something to you that you don't like to tell me. Ha! I am right—I am sure of it. You are blushing!'

'You ask too many questions, Estelle,' said Aggie, looking down.

'Will you tell me what he said?'

'No,' was the firm reply, 'never.'

Estelle's countenance changed again after the refusal of Agnes to satisfy her curiosity as to the dialogue which had occurred between her and Hamilton Redclove. All the light went out of it, and left it in so much gloom and misery that Agnes thought at once, 'If a great trouble ever come to this girl, it will kill her.'

And 'this girl'—to whom she had been drawn by a tie of kindred impossible to acknowledge, whom she had begun to love, in whom she saw a being almost as isolated as herself, and traced

in her a ruling fault that was strangely like her own—was to be studied and soothed in child-like fashion, surely?

When Estelle had withdrawn to a chair by the side of the toilette-table, Agnes followed her and put an arm round her neck caressingly.

'I cannot tell you what Mr. Redclove said, Estelle,' were Agnes's words. 'He spoke upon a subject that was painful to me, and, finding that he had hurt my feelings unintentionally, he was anxious to apologise, and to be perhaps extra courteous by way of reparation.'

'I don't understand what subject you two can have to discuss of so much importance,' said Estelle, moodily.

'It was not of importance to him, and therefore I resented it. It was not his business—he was too curious and officious.'

'Have you quarrelled?'

'Oh, no.'

'And you will not tell me?' Estelle said again, persistently.

'I will tell you as much as this,' said Agnes, 'and then you must not worry me any more. I

have a past that I keep to myself, and don t care to look back upon; and I see a future before me not too bright, and not wholly free from anxiety. Past and future are for my own consideration,' she added, 'and for no one else's, and I resent all comment on them. Do you understand me now?'

'I think I understand. But, Aggie, he shows a great interest in you by talking of your past and future. He,' she added, with a long sigh, 'never speaks to me of mine.'

'It was an accident that brought about a few ill-considered words,' said Agnes, speaking very rapidly; 'he is not interested in me. I am nothing to him in any way, and, I say again, he is nothing to me.'

Estelle's face brightened once more at this assurance. She did not attempt to disguise her satisfaction; she drew the face of her unknown sister down to her, and kissed her gratefully for the explanation.

'I am for ever indebted to you for speaking out so plainly, Aggie. Bella Fayre, in your place, would have only teased me and told

me not a word; but you seem to know my heart so well.'

'You have let me read it very easily; and, my dear Estelle, there is so poor and undignified a story in it.'

'What do you mean by that?' asked Estelle, almost sharply again.

'You have told me a great deal of your love for Hamilton, but nothing of his love for you,' replied Aggie. 'You have given him your heart, not knowing that he will ever care to accept it. You have let your mother see, and possibly you have let him see, how much you like him.'

'Oh! no; he has never seen that,' said Estelle, very positively; 'he would not dream of such a thing, unless he loves me in return. And I think—he likes me,' she added, dubiously, 'and that in time, and if no one step between us, he will ask me to become his wife.'

'Don't dwell upon that fancy, Estelle—and, for mercy's sake, be a prouder woman. There is danger in it else.'

'I have made up my mind to have him,' said

Estelle, firmly; 'and you know that when a woman makes up her mind in this way, it generally comes about.'

'And to the woman's misery, if the man has never loved her,' answered Agnes.

'That would not matter to me,' was Estelle's excited answer, 'so that he was mine—and safe from other women. Oh! Aggie, I could love him if he hated me.'

'My poor girl, this is madness, not love,' said Agnes, pityingly, as her arms tightened instinctively round her.

'Well—there is madness in the family, you know,' was the defiant answer.

'Hush!—hush! you must not talk like that,' said Aggie, 'or think like that. You are too weak, Estelle.'

'What have I had to keep me strong?—what life have I seen?—what people have I known but mamma and Hamilton?'

'Well—there's Miss Challis,' said Agnes, drily.

'Ah! if I had only known you earlier,' cried Estelle; 'for you are strong and wise, and I love you, Aggie, so very, very much.'

'Thank you—thank you,' said Agnes, quickly; 'but I am neither strong nor wise—simply a jealous, irritable woman, when there is anything to be jealous about. You have only seen my company manners, recollect.'

'If you could only come back with me and mamma—if my home were yours—if you did not seem to hold aloof from all of us—if you did not like Bella so much better than me!'

'There, there,' said Agnes, as to a child again, 'let it content you that I like you much better than Bella, and that I shall never forget you in all my life again. That I am very anxious about you, and would be glad to stand between you and these wild thoughts of yours more often if I could.'

'Why can't you be my friend—companion—sister?'

'Because your mamma would resent my interference, and does not regard me as her daughter does,' was the reply—'because in your house I should not know any happiness or peace.'

'You do not like my mother?' cried Estelle, with more shrewdness than her nature seemed to warrant.

'Or your mother does not like me—which?'

'Ah! she is a good mamma,' said Estelle, sighing, 'and you would love her very much if you knew her thoroughly.'

'Think more of her, then, and less of Hamilton Redclove. Do try, for the mother's sake, as well as for your own.'

'You do not think Hamilton cares for me at all? I suppose that is what you mean.'

'I have had no opportunity of judging.'

'But what do you think?' she asked, 'you have seen us together—you have noticed how he looks at me when he talks to me—how often he comes to my side—how kind he is!'

'Your vanity must not take every little look and word for love, Estelle—you have been ill, and people are always more kind and gentle to the invalid.'

'You will give me no comfort,' murmured

Estelle Dangerfield; 'not a scrap of comfort.'

'Or false hopes—what good are they?'

'They will keep me alive,' cried Estelle—'for, take them away—take *him* away—and what's my life worth? You had better have let me drown last week—a hundred times better—than have saved me for such misery as this!'

Here ensued another burst of passionate weeping that amazed and alarmed Agnes, and that remained in terrible evidence of the weak nature of Estelle.

'You must be calm, dear,' cried Agnes; 'you are not strong enough for this excitement, and, pardon me, this folly.'

'Bear with me, I shall be calmer presently,' entreated Estelle.

But the calmness did not come till a late hour, when Estelle had almost sobbed herself to sleep. Hers had been a life of considerable self-repression, the prosaic, every-day routine of a vain, semi-religious, plain young person, with her intellect not highly developed, and her heart abnormally enlarged—and to give way

like this was something of a luxury, after all. Before her knowledge of Agnes Challis, she had not sought for sympathy; she had not received any even from her mother, who had guessed her secret, and given her religious consolation, and completely failed, because she had given no love and trust with it, and had quietly ignored the fact of a Dangerfield's being low-spirited enough to evince affection where affection was neither sought nor desired.

Estelle's last words that night reverted to the old theme, to which she could not return too often.

'Did you say, or did I dream it, Aggie, that you would not marry Hamilton, even if he were to ask you?'

'I marry him! Certainly not.'

'How wonderful it seems!' she said, in tones of such wonderment herself that the musical, rippling laughter of the stronger girl welled forth despite her.

'You take life lightly—you look at things lightly, Aggie—I wish I could be as happy as you,' she sighed.

'There, sleep now. We are talking all the night away.'

'I know!' cried Estelle, with a sudden inspiration that brought her on her side to look intently into the pretty face of Agnes Challis, whom she startled a little by her impetuosity. 'I know why you would not have Hamilton.'

'Indeed!' was the quiet reply.

'Because you are in love with somebody else. There!'

'No, I am not.'

'Because there is a man you care for elsewhere.'

'Not at all.'

'Ah! you will not own it to me.'

Agnes seized her opportunity of pointing a moral again.

'I would be too proud to love any man before I was sure he was ready to love me,' she said.

'Yes, that is all very well—in theory,' remarked Estelle; 'but I think there is some one somewhere to whom, if he asked you to become his wife, you would answer "Yes."'

There was silence after this for a while, and then Estelle said,

'Do tell me. Is it not so?'

'I think there is one man, Estelle, to whom I should not have the heart to say "No,"' was the slow confession here.

'There, there, I knew it,' cried Estelle.

'Out of gratitude,' she added, sadly; 'because he understood me, and had faith in me when no one else had.'

'Gratitude is only another name for love,' said Estelle, sententiously.

After which wise aphorism, she dozed quietly off to happy dreams, if the smile upon her lips were any sign of pleasure in her slumbers. Agnes Challis looked at her long and earnestly as she lay there—so white in her sleep that one might have thought her a figure chiselled out of marble. She leant over her, and kissed her lightly on the forehead—this one strange link of love and kindred, whom she could not help much, and who was too weak to help herself.

'My poor sister!' she murmured, as if the

foreknowledge of all that was to come fell athwart her heart in that hour, like a gift of prophecy.

CHAPTER XXII.

LES MISERABLES.

THE company still lingered at Ilvercombe Park by special request of its mistress. Day after day the old lady entreated her guests not to desert her, and the objections to remain grew less with young Mrs. Dangerfield as time went on. There were no ties in town; even her father, who had wounded her feelings by concealing his marriage with Miss Polly Islington, late of the Opera-Drolatique, was at Brighton with his baby, and it was fine, bright, bracing weather down in Warwickshire. The air of the place agreed with Estelle, thought the mother, and the daughter was certainly a different being

here. The languid character, the apathetic tone, and the strange indifference to everything, perhaps everybody, which Estelle had frequently exhibited in London, were absent, and it was possible that society—even such tame little society as this—was doing good to the daughter.

Agnes Challis might be the ruling agent to dispel the morbidity from which Estelle had suffered, and Frances Dangerfield had learned to trust Agnes, if not to like her; or Hamilton Redclove—taking life easily in Warwickshire, as though his future were secure, and there was nothing to grow anxious about, calling every day, and constituting the place so much his home that, after an hour or two's absence, certain people began to wonder where he was—might be the cause of the wonderful change in her daughter. Might he not be slowly awakening to the fact that Estelle would make him an excellent wife?—that he was almost bound in gratitude to love her, for that unselfish affection which she had so unwittingly betrayed. If this could only be, thought Frances; if, after all, it

should end in this way, she would be thankful for the impulse, uncharitable as it was, which had brought her into Warwickshire. She was fearful of disturbing the position of affairs now, and it was for her daughter's sake, not the mother-in-law's, that she assented every day, with a gentler degree of suavity, to defer the hour of her departure. She was not at Ilvercombe now as a foil to Agnes Challis; she was not waiting to defend herself, or to fight her battle, as had been hinted, with this *protegée;* fear and suspicion did not keep her there, watchful and vigilant, and prepared for all that might happen in the house. She would have gone to town, if Hamilton had not been more than commonly attentive to Estelle, if Estelle had not been—perhaps for the first time in her life—supremely happy, suddenly, if the world had not changed with herself in so extraordinary a degree that she could imagine she was changing with it, too.

Hamilton was no 'catch' now for a match-making mother; but Frances was happier in the prospect of his proposing to Estelle than she

had been for many years. Hamilton had influence, Lord Redclove had official friends of the first degree of magnitude, she herself was far from poor. The Warwickshire air and Warwickshire frosts agreed with her, and she thought nothing of a walk across the fields to Grayling to hear Mr. Fayre's sermons, to talk with Mr. Fayre afterwards on matters sublunary, lunary, and parochial, as he walked homewards with her, when his ministerial duties would permit. She had come to Grayling, despising the man for what she had considered his duplicity, and she had discovered beneath his eccentricity and airs of austerity a man of high honour and deep religious feeling, whose life was spent in consideration of the wants of his flock, and whose only ambition was to do good and see good done. He had taken her to task, and reproved her as she had never been reproved before, and her pride had flashed forth at him, and some hot words had escaped her. But since that period they had been better friends. He was almost her adviser now, and she could speak to him of Agnes and Estelle, and be thankful for

assuring words, when she confessed one day to him that her pride and fear were both in favour of keeping the half-sisters still apart.

'That is the opinion of Agnes, as well as your own, perhaps?'

'Yes.'

'I don't agree with it,' he added, his brow furrowing a little; 'mystery is not in my line, and a slight accident at any moment may show what hypocrites we all are. For I am in this, too,' he added, with quaint lugubriousness.

'You seem to know more of this pitiful story than I do.'

'It is as well not to talk of it, or we shall get quarrelling again.'

'You were too hard with me on that day we walked to the village,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, 'you were very merciless.'

'On the faults which were marring your character, yes. You deserved every word of reproach I conveyed.'

'You said my religion was a sham,' said Frances, indignantly.

'So it was; it was telling you what a noble,

devout, unselfish Christian you were, and you were nothing of the sort. You were the very reverse of it all. Don't you see that.'

'Well, I can hardly own it all at once!'

For the first time since her widowhood Frances Dangerfield broke into a little musical laugh, and the hard-featured minister laughed with her. They were certainly getting excellent friends, and Warwickshire was a county that improved on the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield's further acquaintance with it. The world even was not such a wicked place after all; and there were good people in it, if one rummaged about in odd corners.

It was after a week-day service on which this dialogue occurred, and Mr. Fayre had leisure to see Frances Dangerfield part of the way home. He went all the way; but about half a mile before the journey was accomplished, and over the last bit of meadow land, before they struck into the high road, two figures were seen sauntering side by side, and advancing in their direction.

'Friends from Ilvercombe, coming on to

Grayling, perhaps,' said the vicar, 'I am somewhat short-sighted, but I think I recognise them.'

'It is Mr. Redclove and my daughter,' said Frances.

'Indeed,' replied Mr. Fayre, drily, 'I am very sorry to disturb them.'

'Oh! they are old friends.'

'To be better friends presently, I have a shrewd suspicion,' said Mr. Fayre.

'I don't know yet,' answered Frances, slowly.

The distance decreased between the couples, and an illusion vanished upon a closer approach. The young folk advancing were not Hamilton and Estelle, but Hamilton and Aggie Challis.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HAMILTON IS AGGRAVATING.

It had been a chance meeting between Hamilton and our heroine, although to the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield it was a matter for grave speculation—even for excitement—for many a long day afterwards. She seemed suddenly to awake to a new phase of existence, a new perplexity, a fresh trouble, and once more the half-open door of her heart shut tightly against the woman whom she had striven hard to like, for her child's sake. She thought she had almost grown to like her—at all events, to respect and pity her—until the fact that it was she in company with Hamilton Redclove stirred her

blood suddenly, as at a discovery that was inimical to her peace and antagonistic to Estelle's chance of happiness. Was this the reason, she thought at once, of Hamilton's stay in Warwickshire—of his indifference to business in town—of Agnes Challis's sojourn at Ivercombe? Did those two, as the phrase runs, understand one another so completely as to seek each other's companionship clandestinely, to be apart and in hiding from those who might comment upon their friendship, or intrude upon their confidence? And, yet, was it possible that Hamilton could sink his pride so low as this, knowing what Agnes Challis had been, and how the world's verdict would never completely acquit her? Was there enchantment in the girl, to be the centre of so much discomfiture to everyone about her? to bring within her spell, despite her birth and shadowy antecedents, even the high-born man who had been the coldest and least impressionable of human beings until he had met this mystery in his way?

All these thoughts flashed to the mind of Frances Dangerfield, as Hamilton and Agnes

Challis advanced—it was a mind, despite all its training, quick to distrust. In a lower sphere, 'brought up badly,' and with no religion to back her, Frances Dangerfield would have been a social failure. She was hardly a success in life as she stood.

Appearances were deceptive, and against the young couple. They were talking very earnestly; they had completely failed to observe Mr. Fayre and Mrs. Dangerfield approaching them. Agnes was looking on the ground, was certainly blushing, and Hamilton's dark eyes were fixed intently on her face. When they were all close together, Agnes Challis was certainly surprised and embarrassed, although Hamilton was cool enough for two to make up for her.

'Good morning,' said Hamilton, 'you are going on to the park?'

'Yes,' said his cousin, laconically.

'I must have been a-head of you by a field or two all the while,' he continued; 'although, if I had not turned on meeting Miss Challis, I should have been at Ilvercombe by this time.

'You are going to Grayling, Agnes?' asked the vicar.

'Yes.'

'Your clients have been clamouring for you lately.'

'I fear I have neglected them a great deal,' said Agnes. 'I shall be glad when I am back again at the vicarage.'

'And I am glad to hear that,' was Mr. Fayre's reply.

A few more remarks, and then there was a movement to separate on their various ways.

'You will turn with *us*, Hamilton,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, with stately gravity, 'and if Miss Challis will excuse you.'

'I have no wish to detain Mr. Redclove,' answered Agnes; 'I cannot introduce him to our poor parishioners—they would weary him too much.'

'I am going part of your way, Miss Challis,' he said, very politely, but firmly—'unless,' he said, in a lower tone, 'you expressly interdict my going.'

Agnes was about to answer, even sharply, as

though the question at that time had displeased her, when the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield passed on, saying,

'We shall see you presently, then, Hamilton?'

'Yes,' he replied.

Thus they separated, and it was observed by all three that the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield had only indirectly acknowledged the existence of Agnes Challis that morning.

Hamilton Redclove commented upon this when he was walking by the side of our heroine again.

'My cousin is in one of her unamiable moods,' he said. 'She has been to church; the minister has talked shop all the way to Ilvercombe, and the overdose of religion has soured and disturbed her.'

'She did not appear to me unamiable,' answered Agnes, 'but surprised and confused at meeting us. You are not coming with me much further, I hope?'

'Why not?'

'I am not used to so grand an escort—it embarrasses me.'

'You have put up with it once before,' he remarked, quietly.

'Yes; but I was not taking you out of your way,' she replied; 'and, frankly, on this occasion, I do not want your company.'

They had become very good friends, and Aggie's habit of speaking out plainly was not in any way likely to be restrained.

'Thank you,' said Hamilton, drily. 'Is there metal more attractive, in the shape of a mysterious swain, hereabouts—some one who may be patiently awaiting the approach of his divinity, in the shadow of the hedgerows?'

'I don't think you have a right to ask that question,' said Agnes, very quickly.

'No, pardon me, I haven't,' he said, very quickly, in reply.

They were silent after this, and Hamilton frowned at the grass, and made one or two vicious cuts at it with his walking-cane.

'What the deuce were we talking about when those two came up?' he blurted forth, at last.

'About Estelle.'

'We had exhausted that subject.'

'I think not.'

'You had sung eternally to her praise and glory; she was the dearest young woman in the world, in your opinion,' he remarked—'I wonder for what reason?'

'I like Estelle.'

'It is natural you should,' he said; 'and Estelle is a very nice girl, and I like her, too. I always did—as a cousin; but, for heaven's sake, don't say anything more about her to-day.'

'I only want to say good-morning now, if you will allow me to dismiss you.'

'Then I will not allow you,' Hamilton answered, very firmly.

'You will not!'

'No; I haven't half-finished what I have to tell you.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

NOT QUITE HIMSELF.

Agnes Challis stole a timid glance towards the companion by her side. His manner was new and decisive—albeit a spice of aggravation, of his old obstinacy, appeared to be lurking in the background.

'What more can you have to say to me?' she remarked, with an equanimity he did not perceive was forced in any way.

'Oh, heaps of things! I'll tell you in a minute,' he replied.

But he remained very dumb after this assertion, and walked on, gravely considering, perhaps, what these 'heaps of things' might be.

'I—I should like you to overtake Mr. Fayre and your cousin,' Agnes said at last—'you could all arrive at Ilvercombe together.'

'What a charming triumvirate!' he cried, scoffingly—'the parson, the prude, and the prig.'

Hamilton was in a sour mood now—he was not at his ease or at his best—and Aggie's determination to get rid of him was far from consolatory to his feelings. He hardly knew why, but it was not.

'If anyone else had said that of you.'

'I *am* a prig,' he continued; 'I have arrived at that conclusion, Miss Challis, by slow and miserable degrees.'

'What is a prig?'

'In Whitechapel it means a pickpocket; in the dictionary, a "pert, conceited, saucy, pragmatical little fellow."'

'And that is your definition of Mr. Hamilton Redclove?'

'It is awfully near the mark. Since my fall from greatness, I have approached the character very closely. I should have never guessed it if

my uncle had died before his second marriage, and no one would have hinted the fact to the new nobleman.'

'Your change of position is beginning to affect you,' Agnes remarked. 'You are not so pleased with it as on that Sunday when you brought the news to Ilvercombe!'

'Perhaps I am a trifle more unsettled, and less heroic,' he replied. 'I was going to fight the world and do wonders then, but I hardly like the look of the world so much as I did.'

'I am sorry to hear you say this,' said Agnes, regarding him with grave interest; 'I did not think you were a man to give up very quickly.'

'I have nothing to give up,' he said, laughing suddenly; 'my balance at my banker's is too small for a sacrifice, and in this new sphere of mine I have not met the friends I expected.'

'Did you expect misfortune would bring you friends?'

'It is not the usual rule,' he said, very thoughtfully, 'but yes, I had that idea.'

'Indeed!'

'Not that friends would have done me any good, or I should have been any good to my friends,' he added.

'Do you not consider your cousin and Estelle friends?'

'Estelle again, by Jupiter!' he exclaimed, angrily.

'You remind me of her by your words.'

'Are you an advocate for cousins marrying?' he asked, with a suddenness that startled his companion.

'I have not studied the question,' answered Agnes.

'May I ask, in confidence, if you would advocate my marriage with Estelle, supposing Estelle were one day willing to accept me?'

'Yes.'

'Even if I were not willing to accept Estelle,' he added, bitterly.

'Estelle would make you a good wife, under any circumstances,' answered Agnes, 'but I do not like to advise. I—I hardly care to be taken into your confidence.'

'It is a mere supposition, don't think anything more of it. I should not have spoken in this way, if——'

He came suddenly to a full stop, and Agnes said,

'If what?'

'If you had not worried me about that estimable young woman,' he continued, 'as though you were specially elected to advertise all her accomplishments.'

'I will not worry you again. What a distance we are from Ilvercombe!'

'Are you afraid to trust yourself to me?'

'Oh, no.'

'Tell me something more of Estelle,' he said, mockingly.

'No, I shall not.'

'Estelle will tell me something more of you when I return.'

'I am afraid the theme will weary you.'

Agnes wished she had not said this, but the words had escaped her before she had considered them sufficiently.

'No,' he answered, in so strange a tone

that she could not comment upon it, and, for the first time, her heart leaped strangely. She wished he would turn back—if he would only go away now—if she could only summon courage to say very plainly he must leave her!

'Estelle and you have become great friends,' he said, reverting to the objectionable topic of his own accord, to Agnes' surprise; 'and I am very glad of it.'

'Thank you.'

'Still, may I give you a word of warning concerning her?'

'Of warning?'

'She is a good girl, of an amiable and affectionate disposition, but don't make her your *confidante*, Miss Challis. Never was a young lady so ill-constituted to keep a secret.'

'That is severe on Estelle.'

'You were good enough a short while since to communicate to her the fact of your engagement,' said Hamilton, coolly; 'I believe no one in Ilvercombe is unaware of it now.'

'My engagement!—mine!' exclaimed Aggie, in her astonishment.

'Yes. You are engaged to be married, surely?' he said.

'I am never likely to marry, sir.'

'But did you not tell Estelle that there was —some one—who——'

And then Hamilton felt unable to complete his sentence, which was remarkable in a young man who prided himself upon his self-possession.

'I regret that Estelle has spoken of me at all,' said Aggie, a little indignantly, 'and detailed a silly conversation which we have had together. I did not speak of an engagement—I had no thought in my head of marriage—heaven forbid!—I simply implied that there was one man who, if he liked me, and came in search of me, and had set all his heart upon me, I should feel bound in honour to accept.'

'"Out of gratitude," I think, was the term.'

Agnes Challis was no longer the heroine after this. A fine exhibition of temper, we are sorry to assert, as faithful chroniclers, displayed itself immediately.

'Have you two been talking this over?' she cried; 'how foolish of her to tell you!—how

unjust of you to listen!—how ungentlemanly to repeat it here to me!'

Hamilton Redclove was fairly dismayed at her vehemence.

'I have said I thought I was a prig,' he answered, ruefully; 'upon my soul, I am sure I am now.'

'You had no right to talk of me in this way—to talk of me at all,' cried our heroine, still unappeased.

'I have offended you?' Hamilton Redclove said, earnestly.

'Yes—you have!'

'I did not think you would take this to heart. I did not even think you wished to regard it as a secret, knowing Estelle's inability to keep one,' he remarked.

'You are right—it is no secret,' said Aggie.

'And I am forgiven?'

'Yes—and if you will go home now, please,' she replied.

'Miss Challis, you expect to meet a friend, *en route*, this morning.'

'Well, yes,' Agnes Challis confessed at last.

Hamilton Redclove's countenance lowered in real earnest.

'I wish you had been as frank with me as you generally are,' he said, 'and I would not have bored you with my company so long.'

Aggie Challis was womanlike in replying.

'I begged you to go more than once—did I not?'

'Certainly you did,' he said, 'but I was a dullard, and did not read your anxiety correctly. I did not know the great friend, the particular one, was so near you as all this.'

'And who is my great friend?'

'Daniel Overdown,' he answered, quickly.

She was silent.

'Is not that true?—pray tell me,' he urged, with a sudden warmth.

'Yes,' she answered, 'quite true.'

CHAPTER XXV.

A SHARP BREEZE.

Two memorable walks across the green fields of the fair Warwickshire country had Hamilton Redclove and Aggie Challis taken in their lives; they were both to be looked back upon for all time—this one with much regret on both sides. For each, in turn, was uncharitable and harsh, and each forgot what it would have been wisdom to remember.

Hamilton relapsed into his moody fit after Agnes Challis's avowal, but he walked on at her side, utterly unmindful of her oft-repeated wish that he should return to Ilvercombe. He had forgotten that wish as though it had never been

spoken—he had forgotten everything—his next remark would be proof positive that he had forgotten himself, and the respect due to his companion.

'You might have chosen better than that,' he said.

'What do you mean?' asked Agnes Challis, as the colour deepened on her cheeks.

'I think,' he said, almost savagely, 'that a journeyman gunsmith in a Birmingham back-street is hardly fit for you.'

'*I* think you are not justified in insulting me,' cried Aggie.

'I do not insult you, Miss Challis,' he said, disinclined to give way too readily on this occasion, 'you asked me what I meant by a preceding observation, and I have answered to the best of my ability.'

'I do not envy your ability, then, Mr. Redclove,' said Agnes, 'and I deny altogether your right to comment upon my friends.'

As Agnes Challis betrayed more excitement, Hamilton Redclove relapsed into a cool condition that was hard to comprehend, and that was

particularly aggravating to the warmer party. It was his old character from which he had emerged of late days—that spirit of vexation and intolerance which had driven his uncle frantic occasionally, and alienated him from many who might have loved him for his better, higher nature, which he took on occasions like the present the most scrupulous pains to conceal.

He was polite, and cold, and hard now—'a superior being,' without a ring of sympathy in his voice or at his heart—and Agnes Challis bit her lips in listening to him, and fancied that she was learning rapidly to hate him.

'You will allow me to state, Miss Challis, that I have not hazarded one comment upon the character of Mr. Daniel Overdown of Birmingham,' he said. 'I should not feel warranted in expressing an opinion upon those many virtues which he undoubtedly possesses, to entitle him to the preference you have shown.'

Agnes regarded Hamilton Redclove very steadily—it was possible that her quivering red lips betrayed even a little scorn of him be-

fore she answered. He thought they did, and the expression stung him, though he did not betray the pain he felt at witnessing it.

'In my estimation, he is above all men,' she said. 'Why should I be ashamed to prefer him to the rest of the world?'

'Happy gunsmith!' said Hamilton, ironically.

'Unfortunate gunsmith, if he should ever take it into his head to prefer me,' answered Aggie, 'if he has come to Grayling for that purpose.'

'Still——'

'I will not hear another of your sneers against him—or listen to your mockery of compliment, sir,' cried Aggie, very warmly still, 'if you do not respect me, I claim the right of your respecting a better man than yourself.'

'Comparisons are odious,' said Hamilton, 'and this comparison is especially odious to me.'

'The truth is not agreeable to everybody,' answered Aggie.

'I think I would prefer a lie from the lips of a pretty woman.'

'You will excuse my lying to oblige you—if I am the pretty woman in question,' was the saucy answer.

'I accept your apology—you will allow me to apologise in my turn.'

'For what?'

'For forgetting again your natural anxiety to be quit of me this morning. I am not generally so persistent with my company, when it is distasteful to those upon whom I have intruded. And once more, and before I say good-morning,' Hamilton added, raising his hat with great formality from his head, 'let me assure you I have in no way attempted to disparage the accomplishments of your *best friend*.'

'My best friend—yes,' was the reply. 'One who never pained me by a cruel word, or thought how easy it was to insult a defenceless and unhappy woman.'

His face changed colour at last—Aggie Challis was too much for him, or else he had foolishly learnt to think too much of Aggie

Challis. If he had been playing a part, the part had failed him suddenly, although she had turned from him without observing his discomfiture. He was not aware that he was standing like a man rooted to the ground, that he was conscious at last that in his foolishness he had for ever set her against him, and that he had said things which no woman of spirit could forgive—unless she loved him! Which was never likely to be, although the wild fever-time of love and passion had been close upon himself.

Agnes Challis went on without looking behind her—without looking before her, for the tear-mists had risen to her eyes, and were gathering very fast there. The storm was over, but the rain of grief had come, and heavy sobs of mortification and woman's wounded vanity were escaping her, as she passed, as in a miserable dream, over the green fields. It was strange that Hamilton Redclove in hot impulse should overtake her at the side of the lake where she had saved Estelle.

'Miss Challis, I am extremely sorry——'

Then he drew a deep breath of astonishment and horror at her tear-swollen face, and gasped forth, 'AGGIE!—I did not think—I did not intend—— For God's sake forget the meanness I have been guilty of to-day.'

'Don't follow me—don't say another word to me,' cried Aggie in her distress, 'I cannot bear it.'

'I will go, but pray forgive me—try to do that!' he cried, as he turned away again at her request, and went on with swift strides towards Ilvercombe.

He did not look back again, or he would have seen 'the happy gunsmith' fast approaching from the opposite direction—a thin, dark man, with an earnest, eager outlook, as if for the love he had been long apart from.

Our heroine would have passed him in her blind sorrow, had he not stopped her, snatched at her hands, and called forth, in a tremulous wail of joy and bewilderment, her name.

'Aggie,' he cried, 'it is you surely?'

'Yes, Dan, it is I,' she answered, making an awful failure of her first smiles of welcome.

'And in tears! In great grief, girl. Tell me how that is? I—I don't like to see this.'

'Patience, Dan—give me a little time.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

'THE BEST FRIEND.'

DANIEL OVERDOWN respected Agnes Challis's appeal; he was silent immediately. He would wait for her to speak and explain; there was no hurry, and he was not naturally an impatient man.

Agnes was not in the mood to observe very closely, or the contrast—that 'odious comparison' against which Hamilton Redclove had already protested—between the two men might have suggested itself painfully and adversely to the last comer on the scene. Daniel Overdown was in his best suit, which consisted of an ill-fitting black coat, a black-velvet waist-

coat, and a pair of white 'ducks,' singularly unseasonable for winter wear, and wonderfully white; these, with a blue-satin necktie, formed his *tout ensemble* for the occasion. A low-crowned felt hat, of the 'billycock' type, also may be added to his wardrobe, and this he had pulled very much over his brows—indeed. down to his eyebrows—the wind being fresh that morning. He was a young man still—on the best side of his thirties by one year—but he looked a far older man in the daylight, where his sallow countenance and sunken eyes told of hard work, or of a hard struggle to get work on the terms of that irrepressible society which will not let masters have it all their own way. He was even lined a little, and he had grown a thinner man since our first acquaintance with him in a Derbyshire village, when railway mismanagement had wrecked him for a season, but the same brisk step, quick, bird-like glance, sharp voice, self-possessed air still marked the demeanour of the man we have so long lost sight of.

'Did you come to Grayling this morning?'

Agnes asked at last, and in a tone that seemed to imply her wish to start the conversation from that point, and allude in no way to the bygones. She had dried her tears, and was as brisk and cheerful as it was possible to be in so short a time since 'the showers.'

'No; late last night,' said Daniel, looking intently at her. 'I wrote my letter, posted it, and followed it.'

'You are not busy just now, I suppose, Dan?' she asked.

'Not busy at gun-making, certainly, or I should not have been here in work-days. But I wanted a change—I had business this way—and—I wanted to see you!'

'What a time since we have met, Dan?'

'Yes, isn't it?' he rejoined. 'But I must say, Aggie, you have been very good and punctual with your letters and your news. Never a post late—always on the Saturday has been the letter which you promised once a week to write to me. What a business woman you would make!—and how your letters have kept a fellow from rusting down in Prosser Street! You

don't know—of course, you can't think—how much comfort I have found in that needle-like scrawl of yours, which told me old Dan was not forgotten.'

His voice grew husky suddenly, and Agnes Challis wondered why a feeling of dismay, an odd kind of heart-sinking came across her, and rendered her faint. It was so, but she had been tried much that morning, and there was no getting over it at once. She was glad—very glad—to see Daniel Overdown, but she would have been gladder to be quiet for one half-hour, to be alone for just that little period of time, and think out all that had been said and done that morning since her start from Ilvercombe. She was almost certain that she was half-afraid of Daniel Overdown, and of what he might say in the course of the next few minutes, and his earnest, steady stare at her was like a warning of another trial to her feelings before Grayling village was in sight.

'What business did you tell me you had this way?' asked Aggie, without commenting on his last remarks—indeed, with an effort to dart away from them.

'I did not tell you the nature of the business,' said Daniel, still surveying her steadily, 'but it's a little dispute at Woodley Moor with the colliers and their masters, and I thought I might be handy on the side of the men.'

'Oh, dear!—another dispute, Dan?'

'Another seasonable and sensible agitation,' replied Dan; 'you don't think I would be mixed up with an unfair movement?'

'You are never at peace, Dan.'

'Because oppression is never at rest,' he answered—'because capital is always fighting hard to keep honest labour in the dust—because——' He stopped, and broke into a laugh. 'By George! I was getting on to the platform, and addressing "my friends and fellow countrymen." I had quite forgotten what a small, unappreciative audience I had got here.'

'Go on, Dan; I like to hear you talk,' said Agnes, quickly.

'My old dad used to say "I liked to hear myself talk,"' said Dan, drily, 'and I don't want you to say that, too.'

'Tell me how you have been getting on—

what you have been doing since I left Prosser Street?' inquired Agnes.

'There has not been much change in my life,' he replied; 'what you saw of it before you went away is what followed after you had gone. I have been made foreman at Edgewick's, and risen in the world some ten shillings more a week—but I wrote to you about that.'

'Yes.'

'If it had not been for our debating club, I should have gone melancholy mad after you had left me,' he continued. 'Father and mother, and then you—it was a desolate affair, Aggie, but politics and trades-unions pulled me together, and my pals were always wanting advice, and kept my head clear, even if my heart was a bit bothered about you.'

'You need not have bothered about me, Dan,' she said; 'I have been getting on famously, and everybody has been very kind to me. Tell me about the strike at Woodley Moor.'

'I don't mean I bothered about your being treated well or ill,' he said, paying no attention to her inquiry concerning the strike. 'You

were sure to make friends; men and women will always like Aggie Challis, and see something in her different from the general run of girls.'

'Would you try to turn my head with flattery, when you know I have always hated it so much?' she asked, almost petulantly.

'Flattery is not in my line, and I only say what I think,' was his blunt reply; 'but I know you dislike compliments. I have done.'

'Thank you, Dan. Now tell me——'

'Stay a moment,' he said, interrupting her; 'you and I haven't put ourselves out of the way to hide the truth, and it's no use, Aggie, pretending an interest in strikes, or even in me just now, in order to keep back questions that must come—that I am here to put to you, and which are not worth postponing. Between you and me, child,' he said, very earnestly and tenderly, 'there has been always perfect confidence, and your new friends haven't persuaded you that that sort of thing must be all over now.'

Aggie looked down to hide the tears which had risen to her eyes again.

'No, Dan,' she answered.

'Well, then, tell me about yourself—your new life, your grand friends, the people round you at Grayling and Ilvercombe. Tell me not so much of the happy change that this has been to you from Prosser Street—the change that was necessary, when the old folks were gone—but of the little troubles, or the big ones, that have fallen to your share, despite it all.'

'Troubles! Have I written to you as if I had any?'

'No. But the Dangerfields had come to Warwickshire, and they are an unlucky lot, and, to my mind, care would come with them. Was I wrong?' he asked.

'Yes.'

Daniel Overdown's brown hand rested on her arm at once.

'Wholly and entirely wrong, Aggie! You tell me this?'

'Care has hardly come with them. Estelle I have learned to love, and the mother, who began by suspecting me, has lately asked my pardon for her distrust, and spoken to me as a friend. Until to-day——'

'Ah! there we have it, girl—until to-day,' he cried. 'What has happened to-day?'

'I—I can't tell you that,' Agnes murmured, remembering what and who had been the subject of dispute between her and Hamilton Redclove.

'Why not?'

'It could do no good,' she replied, 'it might not interest you to hear, and it would deeply pain me to relate.'

'It would interest me to hear, whatever it was,' he replied, 'but if it would pain you, why there's an end of it. I am not your father-confessor,' he added, with a shrug of his shoulders, 'and I have no claim upon you.'

'Ah! my dear old Dan,' she said, affectionately, 'you have every claim upon me. You were my first real friend, and you made all other friends for me—my life has been of your shaping, and your honest example has kept me strong and honest too. What would have become of me without you?'

'Oh! there was old Fayre,' said Daniel Overdown, 'and—and a score of people amongst

whom Fayre would have soon found a patron or a friend for you. Drop that, Aggie, please, if you have nothing to tell me. It's too late in the day to talk of gratitude.'

'Still I am grateful, Dan.'

'Then you have precious little to be grateful for,' was his short answer.

'As if I did not know better,' she cried. 'As if I have not heard of your kindness to my mother—of your promise to her when she lay dying—of your unselfish efforts to find friends for me and Sam, and, failing in that endeavour, to become the best and truest friend of all.'

'That is your idea.'

'Yes—certainly.'

'And yet Aggie Challis does not trust her best and truest friend,' he added, drily.

'I do—I do!' cried Aggie.

'I meet her in tears—in terrible grief, such as I have never seen her show in Prosser Street—and she offers me no explanation,' said Daniel Overdown, very mournfully. 'I see her part with a young fellow over there by the water, and I notice he is in trouble too, or shams it,

and I feel there is a mystery in this which she does not care that I should know. And yet I am the best friend.'

'I did not think you could be ever hard with me,' said Aggie, 'but the world is changing and nothing is the same to-day. He who parted from me a short time since has been kind and courteous during his stay here, but he has said very cruel things to me this morning.'

'Damn his impudence. Oh! I beg your pardon, Aggie—but, confound the fellow!—what right has he to talk to you? Who is he?'

'His name is Hamilton Redclove.'

'What! Lord Redclove's nephew? who came to Liverpool and gave Sam two hundred pounds? That man?'

'Yes, that man.'

'I am curious now,' Daniel Overdown confessed; 'why should this man turn from friend to enemy?'

'He is not an enemy, Dan,' Aggie hastened to explain; 'on the contrary, when we first met, he took great pains to assure me he believed in my past, that he trusted in me as Estelle's half-

sister, and he was altogether kind and frank with me. But to-day he was ungenerous, and I —I could not bear it from him.'

Daniel Overdown took his hat from his forehead, and swung it to and fro in his right hand, like a pendulum.

'Pooh!' it strikes me as unaccountably warm to-day for a sharp frost,' he said. 'How long has he been in this part of the country?'

'About a fortnight. He came with young Mrs. Dangerfield on the day Estelle met with her accident.'

'Only a fortnight?' said Dan, putting his hat on again, and considerably relieved in mind, 'and he can't believe in you for a fortnight, after all.'

'He does not doubt me,' said Aggie; 'he has only a—a nasty habit of saying sharp things which he does not mean—which I am sure he is sorry for afterwards—but which are none the less painful to receive, or to think over.'

'What the devil *has* he been saying?' muttered Dan; then he turned to Aggie, with a face

much brighter, and said, 'I can understand you would not like to repeat any hard words that escaped him, and which, if he's a gentleman, he will apologise for when he sees you again. And now let us change the subject. Often have I given you a bit of apology myself for talking at you. Not quarrelling, mind you—not saying sharp things to wound your feelings—you and I being never likely to quarrel in all our blessed lives.'

'God forbid, Dan.'

He shook hands with her once more, and she went on across the fields with her hand in his, for he had not felt disposed to let it go again, and she did not like to withdraw too readily from any sign of amity, or of new confidence, between them.

'How far is it to Grayling now?' he inquired.

'Not more than half a mile,' she answered.

'That's a short look-out,' he said; 'I think I'll postpone what I have to say to you till evening—for I *have* something to say presently, and I don't want you to feel frightened or scared, but to take the matter coolly, and answer coolly,

and as openly and fearlessly as you have ever done to me.'

She felt his hard fingers tighten upon hers, and once more the sickness stole to her heart, and the light in all the world grew suddenly very dim and grey. She withdrew her hand slowly from his, and said, sadly,

'What time shall I see you this evening, Dan?'

'You will be busy in the village for an hour or so, I suppose?'

'For an hour or two. Yes.'

'I shall take the next train to Woodley Moor, then, and get back some time after dark. I will call at Ilvercombe.'

Agnes was startled at the suggestion. Daniel Overdown of Prosser Street, Birmingham, a visitor at the great house of Ilvercombe Park seemed a little odd at first, but still he was her friend and would be welcome. Hamilton Redclove would surely not sneer at him there—and old Mrs. Dangerfield would respect him as a friend of hers—and, after all, it would be as well if he came. Seeing her in her new grand home

might give him new thoughts, and lead him to pause in that proposition which she feared—ah! yes, she feared—was on his mind. This was to be a memorable day of excitement for her from its beginning to its close.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A REPRIEVE.

Agnes Challis and Dan Overdown walked on side by side, and, as if in unconscious imitation of Hamilton Redclove, the gunsmith became suddenly reticent and thoughtful. Was it something in her manner or in what she had said, she wondered, that had pained him, and brought that puzzled look to his grave face? Was she to be ever a mystery, bringing trouble to those who were interested in her, and whom she would have regard her as honest and straightforward—as she thought she was at times, as she prayed always that she might be.

He was the first to break the silence by saying,

'Perhaps you do not like the idea of my coming to Ilvercombe, lass. If so, I——'

'Oh, yes, I do,' she said, interrupting him; 'I shall be very glad to see you and Sam, and so will all the rest.'

'All the rest,' he said, laughing suddenly. 'Ah! that will not be so easy to believe. But if you are glad, Aggie, why, hang the rest of them.'

'I shall expect you at Ilvercombe, then. That is settled, Dan.'

'Certainly it is.'

'And you will come as early as you can?' she inquired.

'To be sure.'

'What time may I expect to see you?'

'Oh, some time after ten; or after one of your late dinners, I should have said,' he added. 'I am always forgetting what a swell you are, Aggie Challis.'

'I am only Mr. Fayre's housekeeper—here on a visit till young Mrs. Dangerfield goes home,' was her reply to this.

'Only a housekeeper!' he said, laughing.

'Ah! that is not much to be proud of, is it?'

'And I am not proud.'

'No, I don't think you are,' he answered, a little doubtfully, 'in that way!'

He walked with her into the village, where he shook hands with her long and heartily, and with something of the old steady stare in his dark eyes, as if her manner still perplexed him.

'I shall see you this evening. If——'

He paused, and then went on again.

'And, if we can talk together quietly, it will be all the better. Such company as I shall find at Ilvercombe is not much to my taste, although I flatter myself I can hold my own against them pretty well, Aggie,' he said, shaking his head conceitedly.

'The guests will not trouble us. We can talk in peace of the old days,' said Agnes.

'Of the new days, Aggie, beyond this, where—— How pale you are!' he cried, breaking off in his rhapsody.

'I am not quite well to-day,' she said; 'I

have come over faint more than once unaccountably.'

'It is to be accounted for by what that fel—but never mind. Look here, Aggie,' he said, suddenly, 'you're not quite yourself. I—I think, after all, I'll come round to Ilvercombe to-morrow morning instead.'

It was a reprieve to her, and possibly she showed that it was so, too readily.

'Yes, that would be better,' she answered, almost with alacrity.

'You'll have time to get over all this—to be prepared for me—to think of what I am going to say,' he went on, hurriedly; 'yes, that's best.'

'I—I don't understand.'

'Ask the old woman—I mean the old lady whom you are with—what I said to her when she called on me at Prosser Street,' he said. 'There, that's a fair warning, Aggie. I do nothing in an underhand way, you see. Goodbye.'

He had turned red and white and red again during these last words, which were delivered

at a railroad pace, after which he darted away from her, and went quickly along the village street, and out of her sight.

There was no necessity to ask old Mrs. Dangerfield what Daniel Overdown had said to her in Prosser Street, when a wish to find Aggie Challis had taken her to Birmingham; it had been told Aggie months ago, and months ago she had known that the gunsmith's happiness in life was centred upon her. She had been glad and sorry together at hearing this, and she had resented somewhat warmly the grandmother's comments upon it, and her worldly warnings of the ill-match it would certainly be; but there was no atom of gladness at her heart now. She was sure of that by the dead, dull feeling there, by the sense of misery which oppressed her, and took all gladness from her; by the consciousness that she was like a woman in a maze, knowing not which way to turn, or in what manner to act. She was sure she was grateful for the extension of time which had been acceded to her, and relieved in mind to know that she was not to be called upon to-day for an

answer to Daniel Overdown's proposal. There would be time to sleep upon it, to weep over it, to pray for a clear judgment concerning it.

Till to-morrow she was free at least.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN THE PRIVATE ROOM AT THE 'LION.'

Daniel Overdown was not back in Grayling till eight in the evening, when the night was very dark, and thick flakes of snow had begun to drift across the darkness. He had finished his business at Woodley Moor, conferred with his brother-delegates, and addressed a mob of men a trifle more hot-headed and unruly than he had ever had the pleasure of haranguing before; and now he had time to think of his own affairs a little, and to wonder how the great purpose of his life would end. He was not quite certain; he had never been a sanguine man; he had not in all his life addressed a word of

love to Aggie whilst she was in his father's house; he had seen her very grateful, very affectionate, and always gentle; day after day for five years had she been his friend and companion, the light of the poor little home wherein he had sheltered her, and shown his faith in her, until the time came when his parents died, and the two were alone in the world. He might have married her then, possibly, but he did not ask—did not hint what was hidden in his heart. He sent her away to Mr. Fayre's, intending to leave her to Mr. Fayre's care till he was better off, and she had seen the world for herself, and possibly some one in it better than he was; and fortune, good or bad, had brought about more changes than those for which he had bargained.

He was inclined to regard this world a little moodily, now that he had made up his mind to the great plunge, now that it had struck him Aggie Challis had seen quite enough of the world without him; now that he had seen her again, and, as he thought, detected a difference in her for which he was not able to account.

With these thoughts in his mind, he walked

into the parlour of the 'Lion' at Grayling, and pulled the bell for refreshment, before he was aware of the presence of a gentleman, who was monopolising all the warmth of the fire by sitting immediately in front of the grate, and bending over it with his hands spread out to the blaze. Daniel's entrance into the room, and his noisy tug at the bell, did not arouse the student from his reverie; and it was only when the gunsmith walked to the fireside also that he looked vaguely and apathetically at him, as at a being who had disturbed his thoughts, but in whom he was not in the slightest degree interested. Daniel Overdown recognised him at once. It was the gentleman whom he had seen with Aggie in the fields that morning—it was Hamilton Redclove, the benefactor of the Challises, the man whose harshness had made Aggie cry, and whom in his heart he did not love somehow.

Hamilton did not know him. He looked at the fire again, and twisted between his teeth a cigarette that had gone out half an hour ago, and left him unconscious of the fact; presently

he forgot him altogether in his fresh application to the study of the blazing coals.

Daniel Overdown took off his hat and overcoat, and drew a chair to the fireside also. The movement was again attracting Hamilton's attention, but leading to no exhibition of courtesy, and not to an atom's worth more room for him.

'It's a cold night,' said Dan, suddenly.

'Yes, it's cold,' responded Hamilton, thus addressed, but not looking at the speaker.

'And is that why you take up all the fire, Mr. Redclove?' asked Daniel, with a good-tempered laugh.

Hamilton looked at the gunsmith very attentively, and Daniel did not like the look, and felt disposed to resent it, until he thought of Aggie again, and of this man being one of her friends.

'I have not the honour of your acquaintance,' said Hamilton, loftily; 'but probably you will allow me to inform you that this is a private room.'

'This is the only room they have at "The Lion."'

'I believe it is.'

'When I put up here this morning,' added Daniel, 'the landlord informed me it was at my service.'

'In my absence only,' said Hamilton, still surveying the fire, while arguing the point of position with the new-comer.

'He said nothing about you,' retorted Daniel, very sharply.

'He did not expect me to-night,' said Hamilton, 'but he will explain when he comes in. I don't wish for a controversy, my good man, but simply for your absence.'

He took the cigarette from his lips, and dropped it into the fire; then he appeared to screw himself further away from his companion, whose presence had become obnoxious to him.

'I thought you were staying at Mr. Fayre's house,' said Daniel Overdown, unabashed by the other's demeanour, 'or up at Ilvercombe. I hardly make out what you want at the "Lion," away from your friends—but that's your business, not mine.'

Hamilton once more veered round in his chair, and closely scrutinised his tormentor, seeming not to miss a button of his waistcoat, a crease in his white 'ducks,' a fold in his blue tie, before looking into his face.

'Is your name Overdown?' he asked, with great deliberation.

'Yes; that's it.'

'You are a friend of Miss Challis?'

'Certainly I am. "Her best friend," she calls me,' Dan added, with a chuckle of supreme satisfaction.

Hamilton continued to stare at him, as at a prodigy or monstrosity, which he had encountered late in life.

'I am glad we have met,' he said at last, pushing back his chair from the central position on the hearth-rug; 'come to the fire, Mr. Overdown, I shall be glad to speak to you.'

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RIVALS.

HAMILTON REDCLOVE was very much surprised at the personal appearance of Daniel Overdown, but he did not betray his astonishment. He had expected—he could not tell for what reason—a tall, handsome man, with a something in his look, or mien, or dress to exalt him above the class from which he had sprung, or to account for the preference which Agnes Challis had shown him, and for the love which a man like this had contrived to secure. He had fancied Overdown *was* a tall, good-looking man, when he had caught a flying glimpse of him on the stairs of his cousin's house some years ago.

But that was all fancy, he could see now. He was terribly disappointed in Daniel Overdown; —it was already beyond his comprehension why this man should stand first in the regard of the girl with whom he had quarrelled, and who was influencing his life more deeply than his pride would allow him to confess. He had come to the private room he had bargained for at 'The Lion' to brood on the events of the day, to analyse, if possible, his own motives and his own heart, and here across his path had arisen the spectre who had the power to mar his whole life.

He *was* glad to meet him, too. Here was a complete death-blow to all the romance he had been disposed to foster; he could not regard that ill-dressed, blunt-speaking mechanic as a rival, even though, for poor Aggie's sake, he would try to consider him as a friend. Yes, poor Aggie, he would say again, if this were the hero of her love-dreams, and she had no ambition higher than becoming this man's wife —this man's drudge, perhaps!

'When did you arrive at Grayling?' asked Hamilton.

'This morning.'

'You have seen Miss Challis?'

'I met her crossing the fields—she wrote to me that she was coming to Grayling to-day, and I went to meet her, as in duty bound.'

'In duty bound?—ah, yes,' said Hamilton, 'I understand.'

He produced a cigar-case from his pocket, opened it, and tendered it to Daniel, who shook his head at the contents.

'Thank you, I prefer a pipe when I smoke,' he said; 'but, when there is anything particular to do or say, I like to keep my head clear.'

'Smoking muddles it, then?' asked Hamilton, lighting a cigar for himself.

'I think it does.'

'But you have nothing particular to say to me?' said Hamilton.

'Oh, yes I have.'

'Indeed—you surprise me!'

Hamilton did not evince his astonishment in the quiet puffs at his cigar which he was taking, and which Daniel Overdown was closely observing.

'You are aware I am Aggie Challis's friend?' said Daniel. '"Her best friend," she calls me, and I am proud of the title.'

'I hope you deserve it,' was Hamilton's quiet observation.

'I hope I do,' said Daniel, after a moment's consideration.

'And will continue to deserve it?' added Hamilton.

'Eh!—what do you mean by that?'

'The best friend of Miss Challis, in my humble opinion, is he who considers her happiness before his own, and will not allow any selfish thoughts to interfere with it,' Hamilton expounded.

'Exactly; that's my opinion, too!' cried Daniel, with great heartiness. 'I am glad, sir, you understand me so well.'

Hamilton did not understand Mr. Daniel Overdown in the least, and he might have politely hinted as much at this period, had not the gunsmith added, quickly,

'I see Aggie has been talking about me to you—she is a good girl, who is not ashamed of

the past, and of those who have been kind to her in it. She is what I call a grateful girl.'

'Yes; intensely grateful. But,' continued Hamilton, thoughtfully and slowly, 'a considerate fellow would hardly make his past kindness a claim upon her, or seek by its means to bind her to any promise she may have rashly made him.'

Daniel Overdown knit his brows somewhat, as he reflected upon his companion's words. He was a shrewd man, and quick to take a hint or see a motive. As the door opened at this juncture, and the landlord appeared, he waved his hand, and said,

'Presently, we are busy now;' and it was not till two or three minutes after they were alone again that he said,

'Has my Aggie told you I have bound her to any promise?'

'Your Aggie has not,' answered Hamilton, somewhat sharply.

'You seem to labour under the delusion that I have; and you, as a stanch friend of her and Sam, one who was liberal with his money—

when money should have been of service to them—have a right to show your interest in her, and to express any ideas you have concerning her to me. But, Mr. Redclove,' he added, earnestly, 'I never bound her to any promise; I never reminded her of any claim I had upon her. I have always spoken, and felt, as if the gratitude was all the other way, for the blessing she has been to me and mine.'

Yes, the man could speak well, and was of deep feeling and honest purpose, Hamilton thought. He could respect him, and it was not difficult to see the good in him. It was not difficult to see even how Aggie's admiration for this man's unselfishness, allied to gratitude for his faith in her, and charity towards her, had brought about her woman's love by the rule governing true affection.

'I am glad to hear this,' said Hamilton. 'To tell you the truth, I was afraid that there was an old promise, or pledge, between you. A mere fancy of mine, which I hope you will excuse.'

'Certainly; we can't help fancies, any of us. Now, sir,' he said, drawing his chair more closely

to Hamilton's, 'you are one of the family I can trust, and from whom I am too proud to conceal the state of my feelings, even if I wished to conceal it; and you may easily guess I am desperately fond of her we are talking about.'

'Yes, I can guess that.'

'I told the old lady at Ilvercombe once the whole truth as plainly as I tell it you; for I had made up my mind to ask Aggie to be my wife, when I was able to protect her, and quite sure she didn't care for any other man—having had a chance, too, of seeing other fellows before settling in life.'

'A dangerous experiment, that sort of thing,' said Hamilton. 'You must have felt pretty sure of your conquest, Mr. Overdown.'

'I was as sure as a man could be who had never spoken a word to her,' he replied; 'she certainly looked up to me, and thought me a wonderful sort of fellow in my way, but I did not regard her as a conquest—as a sweetheart, or let her see even that I loved her.'

'Impossible,' muttered Hamilton.

'At all events, I tried not to let her see it.'

said Dan. 'When I knew she was going into society, and Mr. Fayre's friends were not likely to resemble me or any of my mates, I overdid that kind of acting a little, perhaps—has she told you?'

'Nothing. I am not in Miss Challis's confidence. All this is new to me,' Hamilton hastened to explain.

'I was cold, and rough, and indifferent, till she asked me in what way she had offended me; but there!—she came to Grayling. She has been in a new sphere, she has mixed in the world. I have stood apart from her, so that nobody should say I was running after the girl, and keeping good offers back from her. And now,' he said, 'time's up.'

'Yes, time's up,' echoed Hamilton, softly.

'I have been lucky in business lately; the future is not black. I am miserable without her, and I am going to ask her straightforwardly to-morrow morning if she'll be my wife.'

'And if she does not say yes?'

Daniel raised and let fall his hands heavily on the knees of his white ducks.

'Ay, there you have me, sir,' he cried; 'I don't know what will become of me if she doesn't. I haven't thought of that, you see—she's everything to me. Everything!'

'Yes, I see. It will be a blow to lose her; it will leave a man's life an awful blank,' murmured Hamilton.

'That's what I would have said—an awful blank indeed,' replied Daniel Overdown.

Each man remained silent after this. Hamilton smoked his cigar, and lazily watched the rings of smoke curl up to the raftered ceiling of the room; Daniel Overdown, with his work-scarred hands planted on his knees, stared stolidly before him.

Suddenly the latter broke into a forced laugh.

'It is a deuced odd thing that I speak to a man for the first time in my life of a secret which I have only breathed to one living soul before,' said Daniel, 'and that's the old girl—the old lady, I mean—at Ilvercombe.'

'"Out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh,"' quoted Hamilton.

'Not in my case. My heart has been full of Aggie for years, but I have not blabbed the story out. I suppose I tell you because you belong to the same date of her acquaintance, and she spoke of you gratefully; so you are not a stranger to me in any way. And you two are friends, and Aggie belongs to your swell world rather than to mine, and I've got further back somehow.'

'Not at all,' said Hamilton; 'you are the first man in the world in her estimation.'

'Has she said so?'

'You have a good chance of winning her—more than a good chance,' he added, remembering Aggie's remarks of that morning, and speaking hoarsely his words of consolation, 'and may consider yourself a lucky man.'

'Thankee, thankee,' said Dan, brightening again, becoming very radiant of feature even. 'I am glad you think so. I always had the idea she would keep as true as steel to all her old friends; consequently true as steel to me. Now, do you mind telling what she has said about me?' he asked, with great eagerness.

'I would prefer to spare your blushes, Mr. Overdown,' was the satirical reply.

'Oh, don't mind that,' said Dan, 'they won't do me any harm.'

But Hamilton was not disposed to gratify his companion any further. He had been more than ordinarily conciliatory; this was Aggie's friend, and he had heard much good of him, but he could not sing to the man's praise and glory, and flatter still more the vanity which he saw that he possessed. He had gone out of his way to be friendly, too, when he was low of spirits and bitter of thought, and the gunsmith took everything as his due, and put himself almost upon an equality with him. A shrewd man and a warm-hearted man, but a more self-assertive brute Hamilton had never come across, he considered. Dan weighed upon him already like an incubus, and he shuddered at the thought of Agnes Challis devoting all her life to Dan Overdown's future.

'There is not such another man in the world as you are, she thinks,' he said, scoffingly;

'surely that verdict will content you till you and she meet to-morrow, and swear eternal fidelity.'

'That is the kind of solemn chaff you gents call satire,' said Overdown, keenly regarding Hamilton again, 'and a fellow may take it as it looks, or as it is intended, according to his mind. I take it as a joke, knowing you are a good sort—having had your character from Aggie, who sums up people pretty clearly, and tells gold from glitter as well as any woman. This is your nasty habit of saying sharp things you don't mean, I suppose?'

'I don't know what *you* mean,' said Hamilton, sternly; 'has Miss Challis been summing up my faults to you?'

'Hardly that,' answered Daniel Overdown, 'but I met her in tears this morning, and naturally asked what had disturbed her. And it was you.'

'I am sorry I should have been the cause of Miss Challis's grief.'

'I told her you would be—I said I was certain when you saw her again you would apologise

for any hard words that had escaped you—I was quite sure of that,' said Dan, 'for you're a fellow that means right.'

Hamilton set his teeth hard to keep an exclamation back which made every possible effort to get to the foreground. He was only partly successful—something that ended with 'nation' being plainly audible in a woolly bass. He could have cursed and swore his heart out in his rage, if it had not been for his strong effort to disguise all manifestation of feeling from his companion; he could have flung himself upon the carpet in his prostration of spirit to think that Agnes Challis had complained to this man of his actions, and been consoled by him, and told what he, Hamilton Redclove, would do when he came to his senses. God knows, he had come to his senses at last—he had stepped back from romance to the hard, prosaic world to which he and his 'set' belonged, and there were no fancy figures, rosy dreams, and impossible heroines to heat his imagination again. Agnes Challis was a woman of the usual type, vain, fretful and resentful; she had taken offence, as

was natural enough, at all that he had said—but she had run to the arms of this commonplace lover, this good-hearted lump of vulgarity, to tell her story, and to receive his sympathy.

'Yes, I was rude of speech to her this morning,' Hamilton remarked; 'did she tell you everything I said?'

'No.'

'Not the subject of our little discussion?'

'I can't say she did,' replied Daniel Overdown, after a moment's reflection; 'she told me you had been very kind to her—almost a friend—until that morning, when you had suddenly become cruel and ungenerous.'

'She was quite right.'

'Why, of course, she was. She would not have said so, if it hadn't been true,' remarked the gunsmith; 'and you will apologise to her when you see her again. Won't you?'

'Certainly,' replied Hamilton, politely; 'I shall have great pleasure in doing so.'

'That's all right, that will please her—please the couple of us, in fact.'

'I shall rejoice to render you both this satis-

faction, at so small a cost to myself,' said Hamilton, bowing most blandly to his companion.

'Yes, I thought you would,' replied Daniel, eyeing him doubtfully; 'it's your duty, and you're not above it.'

'Is there anything more I can do before we say good-night,' said Hamilton, rising, and putting on his great-coat.

'You can tell me what the little tiff was about, if you like,' Daniel Overdown hinted; 'I don't insist upon it—I shall hear it all from Aggie, but I would rather it came from you.'

'Why?'

'So that I could tell her you had owned all very frankly, and so spare her the pain of relating it again to me.'

'Why should she tell it to you?'

'She has no secrets from me.'

'A good woman's heart is like a crystal; very bright and clear—and hard,' he added, to himself.

'There's one thing, I hope,' said Dan.

'What's that?' asked Hamilton, turning on him sharply.

He was on the verge of an explosion still. In all his life he had never been so tried as this, had never struggled so desperately with his powers of self-command.

'That there has been no taunt about her past—her birth, her mother, the prison, or anything of that sort,' Dan suggested.

'You have forgotten one thing, Mr. Overdown,' Hamilton said.

'Have I?'

'That I am a gentleman,' he added, with a dignity which awed his listener for the first time.

'Right, sir,' said Daniel, humbled on the instant; 'I ought not to have suspected a gentleman of a mean action. I ask your pardon, freely.'

'Granted—granted. Good-night.'

He was at the door, when Daniel Overdown said, persistently,

'But you haven't thrown any light on the dispute yet. You go away and leave me just as ignorant as you found me.'

Hamilton swung round again, his face dark with passion.

'Well, then, if you must know, it was about you,' he cried. 'I said you were not fit for her, that she should have done better for herself, that she was a lady, and you were only a journeyman gunsmith. I saw she was choosing a life of misery and slavery in stepping back from her new life to yours, and I told her of it—there!'

He strode out of the room into the sanded passage, and beyond that into the night, although he had no mission that lay beyond his room at the 'Lion,' where he had taken apartments after his cousins had left the vicarage.

He went away swiftly and angrily at once, clanging the door noisily behind him, and leaving Daniel Overdown aghast with his revelation. For it was like a revelation from the grave to him, uttered though it might be by a madman or a fool—one of those despairing fools to be found at times in morbid story-books. Dan sat down in the chair from which he had risen, and, with all the self-satisfaction knocked out of him, took up the old position which Hamilton Redclove had abandoned on his entrance. There

was a great deal to think about, and the world was not so bright as it had seemed only a little while ago.

'Aggie was a lady, and he was only a journeyman gunsmith.' Well, that was true enough. 'She was choosing a life of misery and slavery in stepping back from her new life to his.' That might be very false indeed, and the silliest of silly prophecies. And she had told Hamilton Redclove that she might step back, or had hinted at it; and so this gunsmith had been very closely on her mind—and heart—as a man whom she was likely to marry one of these fine days. This should cheer any man up, not cast him down to the depths, when he came to reflect soberly and critically upon it all; but, nevertheless, the world was *not* as bright as it had seemed to him only a little while ago. Hard to explain, this, but so it was, Dan confessed, as the shadows, without any just cause or excuse, gathered about him in that little room.

Meanwhile Hamilton Redclove had marched out of the inn into the blinding snow, whirling

and twirling without in the dark night, and coming all ways thick and fast, as if the sharp winter had not tired out the country-folk already! Hamilton had no object that night, save that of sleeping in the room he had engaged at the 'Lion.' He had ordered a bed there when his cousins had left the vicarage, much to Mr. Fayre's annoyance; but he was stifling still, and it was necessary to dash into the cold air, rather than risk suffocation in the parlour of the inn. Let him get into the fresh air, and walk at a hard and sharp rate through the snow, and away from that terrible being whose confidence and self-consciousness and hateful tenacity of purpose had almost driven him mad.

How long he strode on, taking no heed of the snow-storm, or of the time striding with him, or of the route which he had chosen, he never knew for certain. He was aware of the clock in the turret of old Grayling church striking an hour which he did not stop to count, and of his turning back hastily, conscious of being near Mr. Fayre's, and beset by a fear that he might

come across him suddenly, and listen to his bewildering questions as to why he was pacing country roads, like a patrol, at that hour of the night.

But Mr. Fayre was lying snugly in bed and sleeping peacefully, dreaming not of other folk's love-troubles, and being by a decade or two removed comfortably from them and all the jealousies, doubts, and heart-burnings which troop along with them, and form part of them; and Hamilton Redclove for a while had the silent country lane and the snow-drift all to himself, and to those wild soliloquies in which he was even weak enough to indulge, until some one striding along swiftly, and noiselessly too, suddenly touched him on the arm, and came like a spectre to his side, startling him, and silencing him by his unlooked-for appearance at his elbow.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

LONDON: PRINTED BY DUNCAN MACDONALD BLENHEIM HOUSE.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
3 0112 084219473